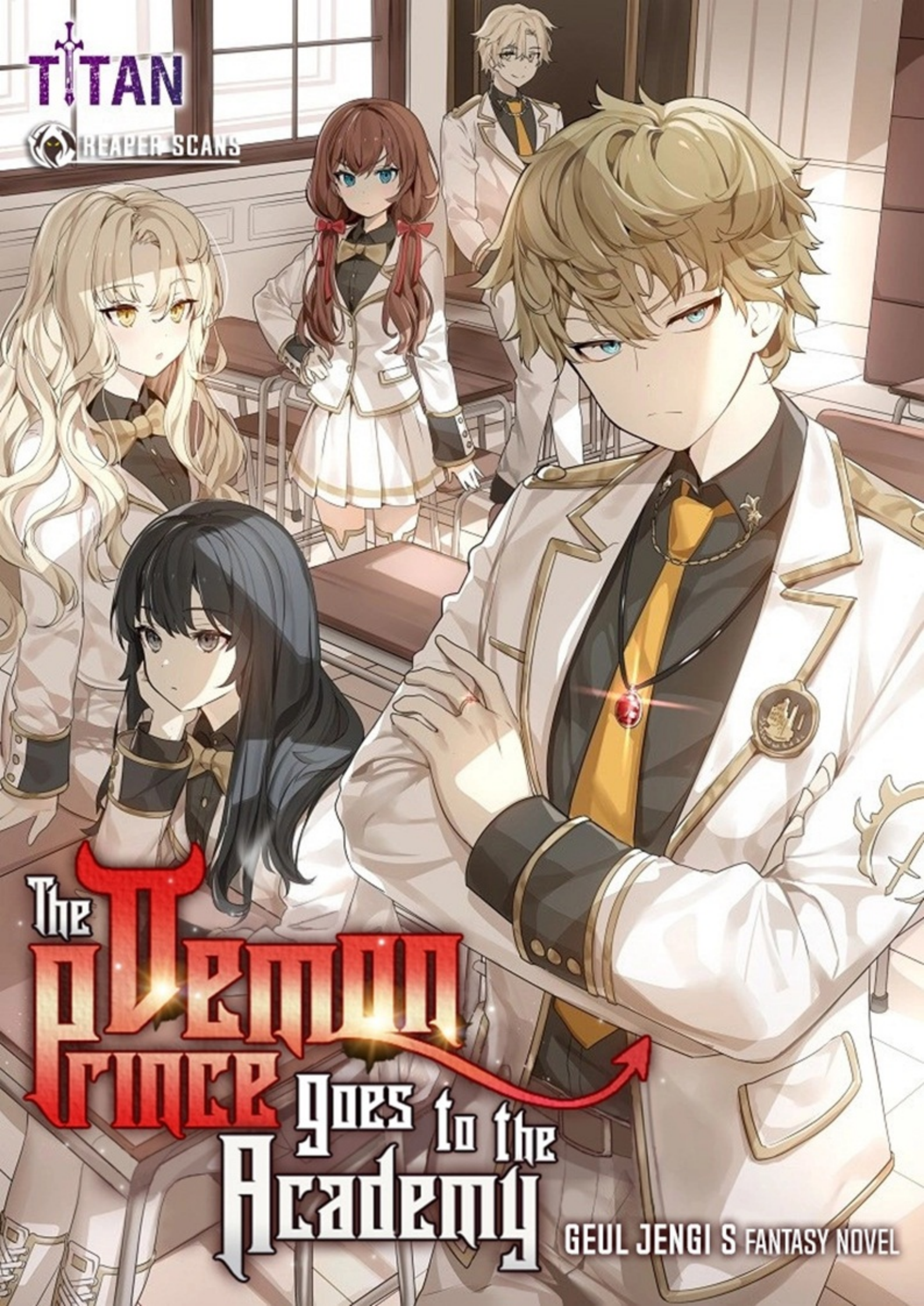
TITAN
REAPER SCANS
The Demon Prince goes to the Academy
GEUL JENGI S FANTASY NOVEL

THE DEMON PRINCE GOES TO THE ACADEMY

– 마왕은 학원에 간다 –

- VOLUME 10 -

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[SUBUDAI11]

CHAPTER 451

Originally, the Edina Archipelago was a remote island nation, detached from the regular warp gate system that spanned the entire continent.

Although there were small warp gates connecting the islands of the archipelago, they did not reach the mainland.

Due to the nature of gate disasters, which produced larger and more dangerous monsters as the size of the gate increased, the scale of gate disasters in the region was inevitably smaller than in other areas.

But that was only a relative comparison.

Grrrrr

They could handle monsters with a familiar appearance, like small wild dogs.

Skreeee

However, there were also bizarre creatures with dozens of arms, each with dozens of eyes attached.

Just looking at these monsters was enough to evoke a dreadful feeling, and with their dozens of arms, they would kill every person they touched, forcing not only ordinary people but also soldiers to flee in panic.

They were grotesque in appearance.

When such monsters began pouring out of the warp gates, people, soldiers and civilians alike, had no choice but to run.

In an instant, the area around the warp gate became a bloody battlefield, and fire-breathing monsters set buildings ablaze. The main port city of Lazak in the Edina Archipelago was filled with chaos and screams.

Thud! Thump!

"What on earth…!"

Succubus Queen Airi, gritting her teeth, impaled and killed the monsters with an iron spear, and then gazed at the still-swarming, ever-increasing horde of creatures.

Since there was no reason for her to have a weapon, the iron spear she held was taken from a dead guard.

Due to the nature of the demon race, where numerous species lived together, Airi had seen many magical creatures and beasts.

However, the monsters appearing now were a mix of creatures resembling current magical beasts and other beings so bizarre they could hardly be considered living.

The guards had already lost their morale, faced with monsters that were terrifying in their very existence.

Airi, who had lost her horn but had combat experience, along with other succubi under her command, were somehow managing to fight the invading monsters, maintaining their sanity.

Airi, the boss and employees of Angel Capital, who had been accused of sucking people's blood through their loan shark business, were the only ones holding weapons and keeping their wits about them in this situation, where even the guards were fleeing.

Airi's grand temple-like Angel Capital had become a temporary shelter for people who couldn't find anywhere else to escape.

People hid behind the succubi and watched as the pink-haired loan shark boss impaled monsters with her iron spear, beat them to death, and even tore them apart with her bare hands.

Airi…?

She's that good at fighting…?

She's like a monster…

Many people huddled inside the entrance of Angel Capital, watching the scene of Airi

somehow killing the monsters that even the guards had fled from in fear.

Airi's physical abilities were incomparable to those of an ordinary person, even with her broken horn.

In the midst of this sudden disaster, she found herself in the position of defending her customers and long-term prey on the Edina Archipelago.

The unexpected calamity.

Rumble

As burning buildings collapsed and fleeing people were crushed to death under the debris, Airi watched with a pale face.

"What are the soldiers doing?"

Airi muttered nervously, but she too was feeling sickened just by looking at the monsters.

The Edina Archipelago was a backwater among backwaters.

In the original work, the person of interest, Airi, reflects on the events happening on the island and struggles with her feelings about humanity.

Those who were highly skilled or exceptionally talented would harbor great dreams and set sail for the continent.

It wasn't that those left on the island were necessarily inferior, but it was difficult to expect them to grit their teeth and protect the people in the face of sudden calamity.

How many soldiers could there be on this small archipelago? How many knights, and among them, how many could do Magic Body Strengthening? How many mages could there be?

If there was someone capable of Magic Body Strengthening, they would be considered the archipelago's elite, and if they were young with that ability, they would have gone to the continent with even greater dreams.

Airi did not know where this situation had begun.

They had only heard from the fleeing people that monsters were emerging from the warp gate.

Was this disaster only happening in Lazak? Was it only happening on the archipelago? Or was it encompassing the entire continent?

No one would know unless they heard directly from the Demon King.

"Ugh!"

Airi pierced the mouth of a charging two-headed bear with her spear and swiftly killed another with the longsword at her waist, impaling its skull. She breathed heavily.

"Ha… Ha…”

There was no telling how long the monsters would keep pouring in.

As they saw the crowded corpses on the streets and the spectacle of more being added, Airi pulled the iron spear from the bear-shaped monster's corpse.

She despised humans.

She wished for humanity's demise.

Grrr!

However, when a giant lizard that nearly filled the alley whipped its tail and sent people flying, Airi's eyes widened.

Humans were hateful.

In the long run, she wished for humanity's extinction.

But was it right for something like this to happen?

Not because of war or any identifiable reason, but due to an inexplicable disaster.

Ordinary civilians, who had never known strife in their lives.

Should they die like this, as if they were worth less than garbage?

Although she lived a life of squeezing money out of people, Airi couldn't help but realize that there were also lovable beings among humans.

Some people squandered their family fortune in a single night of gambling, while others used borrowed money from the Capital, not to form a fleet, but to indulge in money games.

Someone even confessed they couldn't repay the borrowed money and genuinely offered their ship as compensation.

But she had also seen those who desperately needed money, yet the amount they needed was too trivial.

Airi had seen those too poor to become her clients.

She had seen a boy begging for a loan of just a few silver coins, promising to repay it once he grew up, so his sick mother could receive treatment.

She had seen young children scavenging for food because their siblings were starving at home.

Countless sailors had gone hungry due to a lack of money for even a single meal.

It wasn't out of pity.

The triviality was just too trivial.

Airi had lent a few silver coins to them with a playful remark to repay it someday.

It definitely happened.

And She had seen such trivial debts genuinely repaid a few days later.

With a bright smile, the debtor would confidently knock on Angel Capital's door and hand over twice the borrowed amount, saying they wanted to repay it as an adult, but they would do it now.

Airi found the little children so adorable that she couldn't help but hug them tightly.

Even though she thought humans shouldn't be treated this way.

It was just a small concession.

To someone like Airi, who handles an immense amount of money, this was but a trivial matter.

No.

One never knows when the public perception of being a money-obsessed demon and leading a group of money-crazed people could turn into a spear that stabs oneself.

With that in mind, as a public relations and political endeavor, she began a no-interest loan business for starving children and families who had lost their fathers to storms.

Though it was called a loan, Airi had no intention of ever getting the money back, making it, in essence, a donation. Lending money to those without the means to repay was, if not for tightening their noose, akin to charity.

To the adults of Lazak, Airi was a demon.

To the children, Airi was an angel.

According to the name of the firm she established with malicious intent, Angel Capital, Airi was a devil to some, and an angel to others.

It was a small and insignificant struggle.

Such children were dying in the streets, in such a pitiful manner.

Thump! Squish!

With short screams, they were crushed, torn apart, and shattered.

"Ah… Ahh…"

If I were to leave my spot, the people and employees behind me, and those in the refuge, even the children, would all die.

I couldn't leave my position to prepare for this situation.

So, all Airi could do was watch with wide eyes as the small, struggling bodies died.

Airi experienced what felt like tears of blood only once in her life.

When the Demon World fell and she was bound in chains, dragged away by humans.

When she felt that everything had crumbled, just once.

And now.

Airi was not a demon, but a human, feeling what it was like to have tears of blood as she watched human children die.

Monsters were pouring into the streets.

There were small, dog-sized creatures, but there were also unmistakably massive, lizard-like monsters crossing the streets and approaching.

Her broken horn had always brought her pain.

But never like today.

Never had her broken horn felt so painful.

If only she had power.

If only she had power.

“Sister!”

If she could run to the child who was desperately calling her from the streets, she could protect him from the enormous lizard.

She wouldn't have had to turn away from the boy who once needed money for his mother's medicine.

No.

She couldn't turn away.

"Boss!"

"You can't go!"

Airi, having lost her reason, jumped down the stairs and ran towards the boy.

After the fall of the Demon World, Airi lived to destroy something.

But the power she sought to destroy something, one of the rules that made up society, capital, in this situation,

At this point, when the foundation of society was collapsing,

In this situation where all rules were breaking down,

With capital, a power based on rules, she couldn't protect anything.

No matter how much capital she had, she couldn't overcome the violence before her eyes.

Only with her body.

Only with action.

She could destroy something or protect something.

Airi ran with her body, roughly embracing the boy running in the street with her left arm.

"Sister! Sister… Sob, sob!"

"Sister will… Sister will protect you…”

As she held the boy, Airi saw the giant lizard open its mouth wide.

The iron spear in Airi's right hand was shorter than the monster's mouth.

The moment she tried to stab it, she would be swallowed.

It was too late to back off.

Swallowed by an unknown monster while trying to protect a single, insignificant boy instead of destroying humanity.

This wasn't.

What Valier wanted.

Clutching the floating boy in her arms, Airi aimed her spear at the monster charging towards the window.

"Valier."

To her childhood friend who wasn't there.

To the boy she had accepted as her lord.

In the end, was she of no help at all?

"I'm sorry."

Just as she was about to hurl her spear with that thought in mind—

-Whack!

As if time had slowed down, Airi saw a girl with a braided head of hair appear before her eyes.

The girl, who seemed to have shining blue tattoos all over her body, suddenly stretched her hands out in front of her.

-Screech!

-Growl!

The lizard, who had slammed its face into the blue barrier, let out a scream and retreated a few steps.

What was going on?

An unknown magician had appeared and saved her.

"Are you alright?"

Before she could answer the girl's question, Airi saw it.

Valier, in human form, diving down from the sky.

-Whoosh!

And precisely stabbing his divine sword, Alsbringer, into the lizard's head.

-Growl!

Then, the gem around Valier's neck glowed red, and the lizard was engulfed in flames and burned.

"Val… ier?"

Airi saw it.

The sudden appearance of Valier in human form was surprising, but only for a moment.

Airi had no choice but to witness an even more horrifying scene.

-Growl! Growl!

Suddenly, darkness rose in the sky, and lightning began to pour down.

-Flash! Flash!

Dozens of times per second.

-Rumble!

As if targeting the countless monsters in the streets, lightning bolts flashed and monsters were struck, falling or exploding.

"What is… happening…?"

The overflowing lightning in the streets seemed to sweep away the monsters, as if divine salvation had been sent down to face this incomprehensible disaster.

Turning her head, Airi saw a short-haired blonde girl emitting blue currents from her body.

-Boom!

And she heard the distant sound of a fierce explosion.

"It seems like Eleris took care of the gate."

After sheathing his sword, Valier walked towards Airi with the braided girl.

"Valier…? How did you…?"

"Let's talk once we clean up this mess."

Airi was bewildered, and the boy she had just saved was equally wide-eyed.

It was as if the world was collapsing, and an unknown person wielding lightning had completely neutralized the sudden disaster.

"Harriet, can you take care of rescuing the duchess for now? Do you remember her location?"

"Yes."

"Although the outskirts should be clear of monsters, it would be best to hurry. Liana and the Vampire Lords will handle things here."

"Understood."

As the girl called Harriet's blue tattoos activated again, she rapidly teleported away, with Airi watching in a daze.

Valier looked at Airi holding the boy in her arms.

Airi couldn't help but freeze under Valier's gaze.

Rebuilding the Demon World and taking revenge on mankind.

Hadn't she disqualified herself as Valier's subordinate by attempting to save a boy while cooperating with him?

He must be disappointed.

As Airi stood there, unable to do anything, Valier ruffled the boy's hair without a word.

As if it were fortunate that the boy was alive.

He didn't smile, and his expression remained neutral.

But it seemed like he had no complaints about the boy's survival or Airi's actions.

"There, can you see her?"

Valier pointed, and what she saw was a girl, still enveloped in a blue aura, summoning lightning.

"Huh? Oh…”

"She'll handle everything around here."

As if to say that she would take care of the places the girl couldn't see, Valier summoned the Alsbringer in his right hand.

-Swish!

As Valier looked towards the monsters pouring into the alley, a burst of flames engulfed them, incinerating them in an instant.

-Gasp!

-Growl!

Somewhere in a distant alley, they could also see a holy light flashing.

"Let's talk later. I need to go."

"Uh, uh-huh…”

As Valier dashed and disappeared into the distance, Airi hugged the trembling boy, and they both collapsed onto the ground.

"Sis… Are we… Are we saved?"

As the terrified boy hugged her own neck, Airi, her face pale, carefully patted his back.

"Yeah… It seems so…”

It was hard enough to comprehend Valier's sudden appearance.

He didn't come alone; he brought with him a group of people capable of resolving the situation.

CHAPTER 452

In Edina Archipelago, there was only one warp gate in the capital and main port city of Lazak, and it was a small one at that.

Reinhardt had swiftly arrived with his people not long after the incident began, initiating a wide-scale response.

Upon arriving in Lazak, Eleris immediately destroyed the warp gate, while Liana summoned lightning in the vast area to sweep away the monsters. Reinhardt and Olivia, of course, as well as Luvien and Gallarush, all focused their efforts on eradicating the monsters in Lazak.

As a result, the situation was quickly brought under control.

Nonetheless, the gate incident left an indelible scar on Lazak.

Countless buildings were ablaze, and the streets were littered with corpses.

Though the monsters had been nearly eradicated, the streets were filled with the wailing of the people.

Gate incidents fundamentally bring fear and chaos to the people.

In the midst of fear and panic, it was not only difficult to properly deal with the monsters, but even if it was possible, massive casualties were inevitable.

There was no way that every location with a small warp gate would have an archmage or a combat force stationed there.

Despite taking immediate action, Lazak had suffered massive damage, and it would not have been much different anywhere else.

If it were not for a city with powerful mages and knights, the scale of the damage would have been even greater, and the number and size of the monsters emerging from the inevitably larger warp gates would have been much larger.

Seeing Lazak turned into a living hell in just one day, Liana and Olivia could not help but lose their spirits.

Even if this had all been done to save Reinhardt, it was an incident caused by the minions of the Demon King.

Eleris, who had activated Akasha with her own hands, couldn't say a word as she saw the depth of the sin she had committed.

The situation in Lazak had been somewhat resolved.

That's why they had all gathered in front of the main gate of Angel Capital.

Demon King Valier, Eleris, Luvien, Gallarush, Olivia, Airi, and even Harriet and Liana.

They all stared intently at Valier.

Eleris, who had activated Akasha, could not even lift her head.

Yet, in Valier's expression, who had inadvertently triggered all these events while trying to prevent them, there was no sign of despair.

Everyone felt misery and anguish for what they had done, even though they were not responsible for it.

It seemed as if the Demon King didn't think about such things at all.

"Since Lazak has been sorted out, there's no time to waste. It seems like we can handle the monsters coming from the small gates with just our forces… Airi, how many islands in the archipelago have small warp gates installed?"

"…Saint Louie, Port Ramz, and Greenwind."

"Good, let's split into three groups. Eleris, take Liana and check the coordinates for Saint Louie and go there. The Lord of Thursday and Senior Olivia will go to Port Ramz. The Lord of Friday will take Harriet, who should be returning soon, to Greenwind and sort things out there."

The plan was to divide their forces among the three other ports in the small nation of Edina Archipelago, which could be called relatively large cities.

The Demon King's judgment was that having only two of them in each city would be enough to handle incidents arising from small warp gates.

"We need to move quickly. If the monsters destroy the city and escape, we may have to embark on a tedious hunt."

As if there was no time to dwell on the unfolding catastrophe, Valier briefly relayed instructions on what had to be done next.

It seemed like the appropriate attitude for a leader, but also appeared excessively cold.

However, an order was an order.

Following the Demon King's command, the Vampire Lords promptly began casting spells.

Those hiding in Angel Capital, still fearful of the situation, silently watched the city's saviors beyond the main gate.

Valier paid them no attention.

Although it was his role to save them, it seemed as though they no longer held any significance to him now that they had been rescued.

"Airi."

"Uh, ah… yes?"

Airi still didn't understand the situation. Valier simply said what he had to say.

"Let's go to the Edina Palace."

"The palace…? Why the palace?"

"Starting today, I'll be the king here."

It seemed as if that was how it would be since he had decided so.

Valier was unnervingly calm.

About everything.

—---

Deep into the night.

-Whirrrrr

In the burning Imperial Capital, mages hurriedly tried to extinguish the fire.

The most powerful human forces had gathered in the capital.

Nevertheless, the Imperial Capital, the city with the highest concentration of large and small warp gates across the entire continent, was the most dangerous city.

Thanks to the strongest human forces rushing to suppress the situation as soon as it broke out, the gates' crisis in the capital was suppressed within a day.

However, the damage was extensive.

Major city facilities were destroyed and burned, about 30% of the city was demolished, and even more citizens had died.

Just like the port city of the Edina Archipelago, the Imperial Capital was filled with the screams and wails of countless people.

And this was actually better compared to other places.

In every place where warp gates were installed in the empire, even greater calamities were wreaking havoc.

-Kaboom!

With a monster the size of a cathedral collapsing to the ground, bellowing its last breath, the final monster in the capital fell.

-Clang!

Ellen Artorius, who had shattered the monster's entire skull by plunging the Void Sword into its cranium and detonating magic power, landed safely on the ground

after sliding down the monster's back and waist.

Now everyone knew that Ellen had not only acquired the strangely transformed Lament but also the cape of the Sun God, Lapelt.

"Is this the last one?"

Upon hearing Ellen's words, those who had hunted the last monster nodded nervously.

What had happened, had happened.

They were already overwhelmed by just focusing on their response.

Just as the current Demon King didn't express any feelings about everything that had happened, Ellen, who considered herself the cause of this crisis, was no different.

Likewise, the knights of Shanafel, who had hunted the last giant monster, arrived at the scene where Ellen was.

"Ellen… why… why did you help the Demon King escape?"

At Saviolin Turner's words, Ellen looked at her quietly.

Until now, they had been too busy dealing with the situation to discuss it, but now it had to be addressed.

Ellen had assisted the Demon King's escape.

Although there were no casualties, Ellen's actions might lead to another war in the future.

However, Ellen didn't make any excuses or rationalizations for her actions.

She didn't say that this had happened because they couldn't trust the Demon King.

After all, Ellen herself hadn't trusted the Demon King either.

"Do you plan to arrest me?"

"…"

"I don't think you can."

And so, Ellen confronted the Empire with reality, not excuses.

She was no ordinary Swordmaster, but one who possessed two sacred relics.

In fact, Ellen had defeated more monsters today than anyone else, save for Saviolin Turner. She had single-handedly cut down hordes of powerful monsters, not just the smaller ones that emerged like in the Edina Archipelago, but also those comparable to giant beasts, capable of reducing an entire village to ashes in just an hour.

It was inconceivable to treat Ellen as a criminal under such dire circumstances.

The Empire should be grateful for Ellen's cooperation, especially at a time when everything was far from over.

"Please tell me where I should go. There must be many dangerous cities."

Ellen felt a sense of responsibility for the situation.

"And if you have something like an awakening potion, please give it to me."

Thus, Ellen had no intention of resting.

There was no time for sorrow or depression.

Nor was there time to regret her actions.

Just as she didn't blame Reinhardt for doing nothing, as if nothing would have happened if she had not intervened.

Ellen didn't choose the path of dwelling on regret and self-blame, wondering if things would have been different if she had trusted Reinhardt more.

She couldn't save herself or anyone else through a tragic contemplation of the disaster that had occurred.

She had to make decisions in the time she had.

She had to act in the time she had.

She had to save at least one more city, one more person.

Because that was the only thing she believed she could do.

Not regret or self-blame, but doing the best she could under the given circumstances.

The Demon King and the Hero.

In a sense, both had become stronger than ever before.

In a way, neither of them had ever wanted.

—---

The palace of the Kingdom of Edina was located on the outskirts of the port city of Lazak, on a high hill by a cliff.

It was nowhere near the size of an imperial palace, nor was it as elegant as the White Palace Arunaria in the capital city of the Saint Owan Duchy, Arnaca.

Rather than a palace, the fortress-like structure reflected the level of the Edina Kingdom.

Still, it was a royal castle of a nation, not as humble as the castles or mansions of local lords.

Being on the outskirt, it had been spared the direct impact of the Gate incident.

It was not difficult to be led inside the castle.

The city had experienced a disaster, and those who had resolved it were me and my companions. It seemed that people could guess as much by looking at us as we walked towards the castle.

And Airi had been doing business in this city for quite some time. Moreover, the Angel Capital project had been conducted under the support of the royal family.

Airi's friend.

And the person who had suppressed the great disaster, which could have led to the kingdom's destruction, in just a few hours.

It would have been strange if the doors hadn't opened.

The king we met inside the castle still looked pale, and the attendants were understandably confused about the situation.

"Who are you, my lord?"

The royal guards.

Knights who protected the king.

I looked at each of their faces.

"While the people of the capital die like dogs, this bastard of a king is trembling and hiding here…"

My sudden outburst made the king and the royal guards tense.

"I won't bother with lengthy explanations."

Using the Ring of Sarkegaar, I summoned Alsbringer and draped it over my shoulder. The sudden appearance of a demon and a soul-bound sword made everyone feel like they were swallowing a lump.

"From this day forth, all the islands of this kingdom and the Edina Archipelago belong to me, the Demon King Valier."

Upon hearing my brazen declaration, even Airi's face turned pale.

There was no time for persuasion or debate.

I looked around.

"Bring forth the stubborn one."

It was clear that everyone had not yet grasped the situation.

—---

Of course, there was no one who would obediently hand over their country when asked.

The first to react was a knight standing beside the king.

"Scoundrel! Even if the situation is suspicious, how dare you appear out of nowhere and threaten His Majesty!"

He descended the steps of the throne and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Don't draw it."

"What…?"

I said to the knight.

"If you draw it, you will die."

"You reckless…!"

Shrring!

Clink!

The knight's sword had barely left its sheath before it was struck by Alsbringer and shattered as if it had exploded.

I didn't kill him.

But the knight, who had lost his sword before he could properly grip it, could only stare at me with a dumbfounded expression.

"If you try again, the warning will not be the end."

I was willing to shed blood if necessary, but there was no need to do so deliberately.

Perhaps he was the most skilled knight present, for when he froze, none of the other knights or guards dared approach me.

I walked past the knight who had been blocking my path.

None of the other knights or guards could obstruct me either.

-Step by step

I ascended the steps to the throne and stood before the king.

"Move."

"What…?"

At my simple command, the king could only stare at me, frozen in place.

"I said move."

No one dared to touch me. The moment they tried, they instinctively knew their throats would be in danger.

The king looked around, but in the face of the Demon King's appearance, there was no one willing to risk their lives to protect their lord.

It wasn't a matter of loyalty.

It was because I was not just a mere thug, but the Demon King.

The Demon King who had caused an uproar throughout the entire continent.

In a country that had almost been destroyed by the Small Gate incident, which they had been unable to prevent, the Demon King was too great a name for the soldiers and knights of the Edina Archipelago to handle.

It was because I was not a simple outlaw or bandit, but the Demon King.

No one knew what would happen if I started to act. That's why my mere presence was enough to stimulate people's sinister imaginations.

The aura of fear surrounding me could be used to my advantage whenever I wished.

That was why I could do this, barehanded and with only Airi by my side.

The son of the former absolute ruler, Valier.

No one could touch me, as they all imagined the fearful possibilities of what I could do.

I watched silently as the king, trembling, stood up from his seat.

-Thump

I sat down on the throne the king had vacated.

I didn't particularly like the gray stone throne carved from rock, but it wasn't unpleasant either.

It was easy to take the seat of power.

Was it supposed to be this easy to seize a country?

But this was only the beginning.

Just because I sat in the seat of power didn't mean everyone would accept me as their ruler.

Sitting on the throne didn't make me king.

However, I had made the owner of the throne stand up by himself.

That was what mattered.

"Half of the world."

"The master of the Darkland."

"Leader of all the demon races in the world."

"Lord of the demon realm."

"In the name of Valier."

"I promise a peaceful retirement to the previous rulers of the Edina Kingdom, the

kings and royals who have voluntarily abdicated their thrones."

That was my first royal decree.

CHAPTER 453

I had seized the throne of the Edina Archipelago.

Far too easily.

Just because a sudden villain appeared and forced the king to rise from his seat, then took it for himself, did not mean that he would be recognized as the rightful ruler.

However, I was the Demon King.

It was not merely a powerful villain but the fact that I bore the heavy title of Demon King that made everyone feel terror in my presence.

Those who did not want to discover that I was the Demon King now knew it.

So now, it didn't matter if the whole world knew I was the Demon King; I intended to use the fear that stemmed from my name to my advantage.

Fear is an incredibly powerful tool for control.

"As you all have seen today, the warp gates across the continent have been altered to summon monsters from another world. Soon, the disaster that is happening now will not just be limited to this archipelago, but will encompass the entire continent—a disaster of global proportions."

"That's why the phenomenon that occurred in Lazak has also taken place on other islands of the archipelago: Saint Louis, Port Ramz, and Greenwind."

"Currently, my subordinates are suppressing the occurrences in these locations."

"The Edina Archipelago will suffer some damage, but since we are far from the mainland, the situation will be resolved by destroying the warp gates across the archipelago."

"The reason I am explicitly stating that I am the savior of the Edina Archipelago, which would have faced destruction if left alone, is because I want you all to know

that my rule will be quite generous and compassionate."

"Submit to me, and you will gain stability and peace."

"In the short term, I will focus on stabilizing the chaos-ridden Edina Archipelago, and in the long term, I will expand to the monster-infested continent."

"I will give you one day."

"Even if you refuse, I won't kill you."

"Those who do not wish to obey me may leave."

"I will permit you to live as ordinary people in the archipelago. You can avoid my rule by going to the continent, but once you cross the vast sea and arrive on the continent, you will realize that there is nowhere else for you to set foot but this archipelago."

Given that the entire continent was engulfed in chaos, going to the continent was tantamount to wishing for death.

However, they could still judge my words as a blatant lie. They might think that the Demon King is just saying this to scare them.

Whether they believe me or not, and whether they submit or not, is up to each individual.

I did not intend to force them that far.

I couldn't tell if they would accept me, but I had much for them to do.

"The chaos in Lazak has been resolved for now, and there is no need to be frightened. Immediately start the recovery efforts."

Even though the chaos had subsided, the streets were still littered with corpses. In addition to dealing with the burnt houses, the exact number of casualties had to be determined, and efforts to stabilize Lazak needed to be focused upon.

"From this moment, gather all available forces to clean up the corpses and assess the extent of the damage. Also, immediately determine the status of relief supplies,

including the food reserves within the castle, and report back to me."

The soldiers seemed taken aback by my first, not overly demonic, mission directive.

What does it mean to be 'demonic'?

Would it be more fitting for a Demon King to demand a blood sacrifice or a human offering as soon as he took the throne?

Whatever kind of Demon King they might have expected, I was quite different from the one they had in mind.

They were still bewildered, not knowing what I had asked of them.

"Are you not moving quickly enough? If you're going to leave, leave! If you're going to listen and act, move swiftly, you brats! Do you think we have time to spare?"

In the end, it seemed that no matter where I went, they would only understand me when I yelled.

The soldiers followed my orders and evacuated the palace, beginning the process of addressing the damage in Lazak.

I wasn't sure if they would do the job well, but it was only the first day.

I ordered the nobles to withdraw and let them do their work.

—---

Deep into the night.

One by one, they returned to Lazak.

As I had instructed, everyone arrived at the Edina Royal Palace.

Liana even brought the Duchess of Grantz, who had been hiding in the Angel Capital.

They had all seen terrible things, but this situation seemed even more incomprehensible.

It had only been a short time since we arrived in Lazak, and now I was sitting on the throne of that country's royal palace.

“…What happened?"

"I said I was going to conquer the Edina Archipelago."

That was all I had said to Olivia.

There were many stories to share, and we needed to discuss what to do next.

Liana, Harriet, and even Eleris seemed mentally unstable after witnessing the horrifying sights. Luvien and Gallarush's expressions were very serious, though not as extreme.

"Who would have thought becoming king could happen in just one day… Was it really this easy?"

Luvien seemed astonished.

"Given the circumstances, it was easier than expected. Anyway, did everyone handle the situation well?"

"We suffered considerable damage, but we managed to destroy the gates and exterminate the monsters."

We had successfully quelled the chaos in the four major ports of the Edina Archipelago.

"The local governments will take care of the damage assessment, but there might be riots or similar events…”

"There are so many people who have lost their homes… What will happen to them?"

Harriet spoke with a depressed expression.

"We need to investigate the damage in each port. How many people lost their homes, how many orphans were created, and whether we have enough relief supplies."

From the start, it was a headache.

"We won't be able to trade between continents in this situation. I came this far to keep the empire from finding out where I settled. The Edina Archipelago will have to be self-sufficient from now on."

Becoming king to deal with the Gate crisis was one thing, but the nation was in crisis from the very beginning. The Edina royal family would eventually be grateful that the Demon King took care of this troublesome matter.

We shared many stories.

I had to explain everything to Airi, who knew nothing of what had happened so far.

And what we needed to do moving forward.

Where to start.

How to take responsibility, as a king, for those whose lives were destroyed.

It was all new to us, things we couldn't have imagined doing when we woke up that morning.

But we had to do it.

—---

Perhaps it was the longest day I had ever experienced in my life, and I had not yet finished it.

Although we had seized the royal palace, the royal family who had ruled the Edina Archipelago until now still lived within the castle.

It was a robbery without even a pretext, but I was the Demon King.

Just as people thought I had evil intentions because I was the Demon King and interpreted my actions as they pleased, I had no intention of securing the legitimacy of my rule by asserting my so-called status.

They would assume I was doing this because I was the Demon King and leave it at that.

I wouldn't drive out the royalty overnight. I had to absorb the information they knew about the archipelago and the intellectual basis for their rule.

I stood atop the royal palace's spire, looking out over the night landscape of Lazak, which spread out below the cliff.

The port city was quiet after the resolution of the Gate incident. From a distance, I could see soldiers carrying torches, following my orders to clean up the corpses.

There were still places where smoke rose, and it seemed like I could hear the cries of children who had lost their parents, as if in hallucinations.

Was all of this my fault?

From the spire, I could see the horizon of the sea beyond the harbor.

Beyond that sea, on the continent, people were still dying.

This was the destiny I had to face.

Everyone in the temple who wasn't here would probably be gradually thrown into battle as the mobilization order came down.

Someone would die, and since the Gate incident happened earlier than expected, one of my peers might die as well.

In this situation that had arisen because of me, I was trying to start something on this remote archipelago at the southernmost end of the continent.

Could this be a way to save someone?

Or was it just setting the stage for another war?

“Ahhhh!”

A cry that shouldn't be heard seemed to come from between the city lights.

-Splash

A sound of the sea waves that shouldn't be heard seemed to reach me.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

When I turned my head at the sound coming from behind, there was Liana de Grantz.

Even though I had become the king, were we still friends?

It was ridiculous to think of myself as a king when I had not even been on the throne for a day.

Liana stood beside me, crossing her arms and looking down at the landscape of Lazak.

Liana de Grantz.

Her magic was important, but Liana's lightning ability was a great help in suppressing the Gate incident.

And it was a great help when I escaped.

"When did you know?"

Liana knew that the murder of Duke Grantz wasn't my doing.

That's why she saved me.

"Not long ago. My mother told me."

“…Really?"

"I thought my father was saying strange things, but a revolution? I never thought he'd try something so bizarre."

Liana looked down at Lazak with a snicker. Strictly speaking, there was no connection between Liana finding out the truth and her saving me.

However, Liana tried to save me and actually did.

This meant that there was another intention besides saving me.

"Do you want to destroy the empire?"

"…"

Liana was silent at my words.

"I thought you could do it."

It was not only to save her friend but also to save the Demon King.

Liana knew that Duke Grantz's death was due to the Empire's internal strife, and so she must have harbored a desire for revenge against the Empire.

It struck me anew how great Liana's desire for revenge was that she didn't immediately attack Bertus, Charlotte, or Turner.

It would be a desire for revenge that couldn't be satisfied by killing just a few royals.

Only the collapse of the Empire could satisfy such an insatiable desire for revenge.

I couldn't gauge how deep and dark the desire for revenge was beneath Liana's calm appearance.

Could it be a feeling of despair, similar to what I feel or perhaps even deeper?

Just like how Harriet gave up being a princess to stand by my side.

And Liana abandoned her position as a duchess to stand by me as well.

Of course, in this moment when the world is swaying, how much meaning does that hold?

"It seems like you weren't really interested in those things."

"That's true."

I told them that I started all this to protect humanity, and I'm still working for that cause.

The Demon King seemed plausible as a partner for her revenge, but in reality, he probably wasn't.

I don't want war and I don't hope for the collapse of the empire.

However, Liana stretched and then draped her arm over my shoulder.

"But, you know, it's not like you wanted things to turn into a mess like this, right?"

“…That's true."

My existence was already destruction itself, and by the time I realized that, it was too late for many things.

In the original work, the Gate Incident was caused by Valier, but this time it happened because of Eleris.

Wishing for nothing to happen led to something happening after all.

It felt as if I had become the protagonist of an old oracle.

"So, the things you don't want to happen somehow all end up happening, right?"

“…Isn't that a bit harsh?"

"Isn't it that the gate incident happened because you don't want it to happen? All because of you."

Liana laughed with a cackle.

Her words were so malicious that they didn't even make me angry.

"So, if we have to go to war with the empire even if you don't want to, I'll lend you a hand."

I had wished for humanity's peace and stability, but the Gate Incident happened because of me.

Still, I wish for humanity's peace and stability, and the preservation of the empire, but it might collapse because of me.

It seems that the world is falling apart in such a way.

Liana seemed to think that as long as she stayed by my side, her chance for revenge would come. Liana still had her arm around my neck and was looking at the view of Lazak.

"Hey, so am I… one of the Four Heavenly Kings?"

At Liana's words, I felt as if I couldn't breathe.

Four Heavenly Kings?

Why is she thinking of something like that?

"I am to become one of the Four Heavenly Kings, right?"

Liana looked at me with sparkling eyes.

Become one?

Does she think this is some kind of neighborhood gang leader game?

"Uh… well… how can you be one of the Four Heavenly Kings when you're just alone?"

"Let's find three more. If the Vampire Lords are like elders, then… Harriet, Olivia, and… who was it? The one with pink hair? Doesn't that make four?"

Why is the topic suddenly shifting like this after talking about revenge?

"Wow, that seems plausible. Magic, Holy Knight, Supernatural, and I don't know what the pink-haired one is, but anyway, it's four."

Airi, Liana, Harriet, Olivia.

It seemed like Liana had drawn a blueprint of the Four Heavenly Kings in her mind without me saying anything.

I didn't say anything, did I?

"Hey, Demon King, make my nickname cool, okay? Huh?"

-Poke poke

Liana poked my side with the arm she had around my neck.

"You're crazy."

At my words, Liana let go of my neck, laughing.

Actually, it might be easy to think of one.

Since she has lightning powers, maybe something with the lightning word…

Damn it, why am I even thinking about this?

"Anyway, you must have had a hard time. I saw your face turn pale when you were running away earlier."

I couldn't clear up Liana's misunderstanding, so when I encountered her while fleeing, I thought everything was over.

In reality, it was quite the opposite.

"You've gone through a lot. How did you manage to hold back from making excuses?"

"Well, if I had made excuses, the problem would have gotten worse."

"Exactly."

Liana clicked her tongue.

"How have you managed to endure it so far?"

Building relationships with people without revealing my identity.

I had endured it amidst feelings of guilt and pressure.

As if it were remarkable that I had endured it until now, Liana affectionately ruffled my hair.

"Do you want to keep being a pain?"

Talking with her somehow made me feel like I was back in the days at the temple

that I could never return to.

It was a pleasant feeling.

Yet, it was also a feeling so faint and sorrowful that it was almost unbearable.

"Anyway, I'm going to go. I need to rest. I'm exhausted."

As if to say it had been an equally long day for her, Liana stretched and prepared to leave.

"Cliffman."

Unable to hold back, I asked the question I should have, but never did.

"…"

"Are you okay?"

"Okay? What do you mean?"

Liana's voice sank in her reply.

"I mean, just… anything."

"I didn't say anything to him. To that kid."

I remembered him making a vow with her to take revenge on the Demon King.

But in reality, Liana hadn't said a word to Cliffman about it.

Was it because she couldn't share the fact that the Empire was too great an enemy, even more so than the Demon King?

Liana had conspired with Harriet, but she hadn't said a word to Cliffman.

That's why Cliffman would remember Liana as a traitor to the Empire and humanity.

Just as I had piled up misunderstandings.

Liana would also accumulate misunderstandings.

I wondered if that was okay.

Because when those misunderstandings piled up and burst, it made me feel so terrible that I wanted to die.

"I have to be okay."

Liana said that and left.

Because the enemy was too great, Liana hadn't said a word to Cliffman.

Liana, Harriet, and Olivia would be remembered as traitors to the Empire and humanity.

Because of that, everyone would have to bear something, and I would have to bear their burdens in their place.

Because I am their king. Because they chose me.

I must become a being capable of protecting those who chose me.

CHAPTER 454

Before the day drew to a close, just as Liana had sought me out, I felt the need to share a conversation with everyone.

Those who met me in the castle hurriedly lowered their gaze and fled, or their faces turned pale, and they trembled in fear.

It wasn't as if I had a terrifying appearance, apart from the horns.

Perhaps they were afraid of me because they imagined something more than what was visible.

My companions were now planning to stay in the guest rooms within the palace.

After deciding the accommodations for the remaining royal family members, everyone would have proper rooms and dwellings.

I had resolved to become king, but I didn't know what exactly a king had to do. That's why I needed the help of those around me and the support of the previous royal family.

I seized the country without any preparation, declaring that I would be king.

It was bound to be absurd.

As I descended from the tower and entered the area where the guest rooms were, I found Harriet gazing vacantly outside from the terrace of the castle.

Feeling my presence, Harriet looked at me and gasped.

"Ah… Uh, ah… Reinhardt…”

She couldn't be used to seeing me in this demon king form.

"Is this… your true form?"

"Well… you could say that."

I wondered if my true form held any meaning.

Harriet seemed to scrutinize my face as if trying to tear it apart.

"It's like… you seem like you, but… you're different… but not completely different…"

Harriet stared at me, seeming puzzled.

"I don't know. I'll get used to it eventually."

I felt a strange resonance with those words.

It meant that she would always be by my side.

Harriet and I stood side by side on the terrace.

The words I spoke to her weren't very long.

I told her that I tried to save everyone, no matter what happened, and asked her to trust me.

How could she possibly believe such a thing? Compared to my single statement, the things I had done and my true identity must have been difficult to handle.

Moreover, this situation was ultimately my fault.

I didn't know how things would unfold in the long run, but Harriet had practically become humanity's enemy.

"You seem to be lost in thought."

Harriet murmured quietly as she gazed out the window.

It was fine if it was my problem. I could handle the issues I faced and the situations I was in.

However, it was another matter entirely for those who had chosen me to share the pressure inflicted upon me because of my actions.

"Now isn't the time to think about too many things."

Harriet said as she took my hand.

"I don't know what the others think. I only know what I think."

Harriet looked up at me.

"I'm okay. So don't worry about me."

As if to alleviate some of the burden that had been lifted from me, Harriet smiled at me.

Although she must have been worried about the fate of the duchy, Harriet comforted me in this situation.

Thinking about it, Harriet always worried about me when things got serious.

She had done the same during my duel in the early days of our terrible first year together.

Harriet, who had been watching the duel expecting me to be beaten horribly, worried about me when I really did suffer.

She had always been on my side when it mattered most, and sometimes I helped her too.

At some point, I had always been receiving help from Harriet.

"I no longer think I can say that everything will be fine," she said.

Harriet held my hand tightly as she stared silently out the window. The situation was terribly grim, and even in this brief moment of respite, people were still dying.

Not everything could go well. It was already too late for many things.

"Still, there must be something we can do. There must be something only I can do."

Harriet looked at me.

"You too, there must be something only you can do because you are you."

So instead of feeling guilty or sorry, let's find what we can do.

That's what Harriet said.

It was exactly what I was thinking too.

But just knowing that someone else had the exact same thoughts as me provided a strange sort of comfort.

"Thank you."

As the most talented magician, Harriet would find something she could do.

As the Demon King, I needed to find what I could do.

—---

After speaking with Harriet, I went to find Olivia.

"Ah, Reinhardt."

Olivia saw me and immediately embraced me.

"We didn't have time to talk properly with everything going on. I'm so, so relieved you're safe."

"Thank you, sister."

I embraced Olivia as well.

I had thought that Olivia would be on my side even knowing I was the Demon King. But actually seeing her stand by me was a different matter.

Olivia did what she could.

If not for her, I might have been quickly dealt with. In that case, the Gate Incident might not have happened.

In the end, the actions Olivia took bought me a few more days, and those few days led to the Gate Incident unfolding.

But I couldn't blame Olivia. There was no guarantee that the Gate Incident wouldn't have happened if I had died.

Olivia tried to save me and played a decisive role.

There was no reason to blame her for the fact that I survived and the Gate Incident happened because of her as well.

I could only think that it was thanks to Olivia that I had survived and was now able to do something.

I had to think that what I did to save Olivia at great risk led to my survival in this disastrous situation.

Olivia and I sat down on chairs.

"Honestly, I'm truly, truly relieved that you're safe, but I'm against everything that's happened."

"…"

"Finding out that you were the Demon King was truly shocking… but now that I know, I just can't understand."

It was bound to be that way.

"You have no reason to protect humans. Although this happened in the end, you tried to prevent it. And coming all the way to this distant southern country and seizing it overnight is impressive, but… even if you can handle this Gate Incident, what's next?"

I couldn't help but understand what Olivia was trying to say.

What would happen after everything was resolved?

"In the end, the fact that we're the root cause of the Gate Incident doesn't change. No matter what you do to save humans, they'll hate us. And to control the confused public sentiment, the empire will declare the Demon King as the root of all evil, and

it's not like they'd be wrong."

Since Eleris activated Akasha, it wasn't exactly a smear campaign for the empire to say we were the cause of the Gate Incident.

"The empire won't admit that none of this would have happened if they had believed you even a little, and they have no reason to. They will inevitably direct all the blame at us."

"Of course."

"In the end, the Empire and the humans will blame you for all of this and try to kill you. No one will know how many people we tried to save, or that you never really wanted any of this. No one will understand, and no one will even try to acknowledge it. Just because you're the Demon King. With just those two words, they'll bury the truth."

Olivia sighs.

"Let's not do anything. The southern island countries won't be affected by the Gate incident. So, let's just leave the matters of the continent and the humans behind. Let's live quietly among ourselves. We don't really need to be like a king. It's just going to be bothersome. So, let's take our people and live somewhere quiet. I don't see why you have to risk your life for something that will never be recognized by anyone."

Olivia, a human, tells me to turn away from humans.

Since I am the cause of the Gate incident, everything I do will never be acknowledged by any human.

Once the Gate incident is resolved, the Empire will target me.

They will stabilize the political situation with hatred toward the Demon King, promoting unity and solidarity among humans.

All of this is too obvious, and it's clear that such things will happen without much thought.

These are things I know even without Olivia telling me.

That's why Olivia suggests we live quietly.

"If it had been for someone's recognition or acknowledgment, I wouldn't have started in the first place."

I had a choice.

To do something, or not to do something.

It was Sarkegaar's idea to enter the temple, but I could have just lived quietly within it.

I didn't do that. I tried to do something and achieve something.

But in the end, all of that led to the Gate incident.

So now, should I turn away from everything and do nothing?

I can't do that.

Since I chose to do something, if the result of my actions is the Gate incident, then I must do something else in response.

It's not for someone's acknowledgment.

No, and it's not that no one acknowledges me.

"Besides, those who need to know the truth, do. That's enough."

At least there are people who know my intentions were not malicious.

Though I will inevitably face countless misunderstandings and hatred, those who need to know, do.

Even if the Empire directs all its arrows of blame at me, at least they can't deny that my intentions were pure. If not, they wouldn't have immediately revealed the only solution to the Gate incident.

Still, the Empire will make me the scapegoat and the target of all hatred.

But they know that my intentions cannot be denied.

That's enough.

"And if I hadn't done anything in the first place, I wouldn't have become so close to you, right?"

"…"

"Not everything was bad. There were good things, too. Definitely."

Just because a massive negative outcome has occurred doesn't mean everything I've done so far has led to this situation.

Harriet, Liana, and Olivia chose to believe in me and follow me.

Not everything was bad.

If I hadn't done anything because it wasn't necessary, I wouldn't have had a reason to save Olivia in the first place.

As a result of risking danger to save Olivia, I was able to survive.

"So, the things I'm about to do, the things I don't need to do, they won't all necessarily turn out badly for me. There could be good things, and this could turn out to be a good thing for me later on. Like when you saved me, sister. That kind of good thing."

"…"

Olivia seemed at a loss for words at my statement, silently staring at me.

"I didn't think you'd listen to what I have to say. You always do things your own way. You saved me on your own accord, and you've done all sorts of things like that. I doubt my words would have any effect on you."

Olivia smiled at me.

"From now on, no matter what you or I do, there'll be no secrets between us, right?"

"Of course."

Satisfied with my response, Olivia grinned brightly.

If the Gate incident comes to a close, a clash with the Empire may be inevitable.

It could bring about a future that inflicts devastating damage on humanity or, on the other hand, a future where I die even more miserably.

Olivia, Liana, and Harriet.

Everyone who helped me could also die in a wretched state.

I won't let such a future come to pass.

I won't cower in fear, imagining that my attempt to do something will end in failure, just because I failed once before when I tried to do something.

Whether I do nothing or try to do something, the world will hate me.

If that's the case, at the very least, I will try to do something.

CHAPTER 455

Next, I went to see Airi.

"Valier…"

Airi was sitting by the window in the guest room, staring outside.

Everyone seemed to be doing the same.

It was as if they couldn't bear not seeing the impact of the calamity that occurred today on the city. Everyone was watching the outside in their own way.

When I arrived, Airi, with a child in her arms, was blankly staring at a lizard monster, which was running towards her.

If Harriet had been even a little late, Airi might have died.

I'm not sure what happened that made Airi, who once hated humans, take such an action.

However, in the end, did Airi also realize that there is something worth protecting, regardless of race?

As I did for others, I explained to Airi.

What I had intended to do.

And what I plan to do in the future.

"You tried to stop this from happening…"

"I failed, but yeah, I did."

"It's amusing. It's surprising that you didn't actually care about the reconstruction of the demon realm, but in the end, you were forced into a situation where you had no choice but to do it."

Airi stared quietly out the window.

"If Darkland begins anew from here, the Darkland that will be reconstructed from now on would include humans, right?"

"Probably so."

While I can rule over the demons with my power, I cannot control humans in the same way.

I can suppress a kingdom, and I can rule over a single village.

But an entire nation. If all the land beyond the horizon that my eyes can see is mine, and humans whom I cannot see are under my rule, and if they reject me.

What should a king do? In what manner, with what logic, should humans be ruled?

I don't know.

"It's… romantic, in a way."

Airi looked out the window, perhaps imagining a Darkland that included humans, and then looked back at me.

"You know, Valier."

"What?"

"Romanticism comes from the fact that it's not easy."

"…"

A nation that includes all demons and humans.

It would be romantic but also nearly impossible.

That's why the term romanticism is used to describe something that is beautiful yet difficult to achieve.

"But I'm a succubus, right?"

Airi looked at me and smiled.

"Valier, if that's your dream."

"…"

"Since I've lost the ability to grant dreams now, I'll try to make that dream come true in reality."

A demon associated with dreams, the succubus.

A demon that makes someone dream and absorbs their energy, but now it's impossible to make someone dream.

So, she'll try to make that dream come true in reality.

Her words had a profound resonance.

Airi gazed quietly out the window.

The sight of soldiers moving with torches in their hands could be seen far below on the cliffside.

"Still… I wish I had that power today."

"…Yeah?"

The power to make dreams.

Why would she feel that power is missed in this situation?

"Many children must have lost their parents and siblings. They won't be able to sleep properly, and even if they do sleep, they won't be able to escape from that nightmare…"

"Ah."

"Even if I can't save someone's reality, I could have made them have comfortable dreams while they slept. Even if there's hell after waking up, just for the moments they sleep… I could have given them a brief happiness…"

Not to absorb their energy, but to let them have a peaceful dream.

Escaping the cruel nightmare of reality, even if only for a brief moment within a dream, they could find solace.

It seemed as though she desired to use her power not for her own sustenance, but to aid the suffering souls.

The ability to gift dreams, the power of a succubus, could it not be considered a demonic power?

While it couldn't redeem someone's reality, it would be dreadfully sweet.

But even with the intent to truly save someone, it remained a power incapable of salvation.

The human who receives a dream from a succubus, and the succubus who gifts the dream.

It becomes a truly sorrowful power when the succubus uses it not for their own energy, but for the happiness of another.

Neither demon nor human can give or receive true salvation.

However, believing that even a brief anesthesia is necessary for those who have experienced hell, Airi longed for her power.

Could it be?

Is it possible?

A feature he had never used before.

He uses the 'Setting Addition'.

The succubus's horns grow back.

[This feature cannot be used.]

As expected, it won't work.

[In order to add this setting, 'Common Sense Modification' must occur.]

[Such a level of setting addition cannot be performed.]

It seemed he understood the meaning.

It is common sense that severed horns of demons do not grow back.

However, if a setting is added that severed horns grow back, the common sense of all succubi and Airi, who believed that horns do not grow back, must change.

That's not just adding a setting; it's rewriting the world itself.

That's why it cannot be performed.

However, the important thing is that it doesn't merely say it cannot be done but adds an explanation.

Is it possible if I try?

Does that mean it can be done if used in a direction that doesn't cause a change in common sense?

This system function, which I can use, is never available during crucial moments.

As if I could not turn the tables with revision.

Still, in such situations and feelings, it seems possible to use it with certainty.

It must not be too broad in meaning but rather be considerably limited.

The more detailed, the more limited, the more likely it can be added.

An event that doesn't cause a change in common sense.

In that case, a sufficient reason must be attached.

Some rational reason for horns that shouldn't grow back to grow.

No, it doesn't even have to be rational; it can be something that should never happen

under normal circumstances.

Any plausible basis.

Anyway, a basis for making it happen.

Ah.

I seem to know what to do.

I use the Setting Addition feature.

'With the power of the "Word Magic", I can "regrow" the "horns" of the "succubus race".'

A very limited and specific setting addition.

A power that makes anything possible, but even I don't know the extent of its possibilities.

The Word Magic can serve as the basis.

[Adding this setting requires 10,000 achievement points.]

It's possible.

It's not a small cost, but my held achievement points are over 100,000.

There is no reason not to use them.

[10,000 achievement points will be used.]

[The setting has been added.]

It's a feature I had used again after a very long time.

I gaze at Airi quietly.

"You have horns, don't you?"

"Ah… Why my horns?"

"They'll grow back."

"…?"

Airi tilted her head, as if questioning what I was saying.

She wouldn't know what had happened to her.

"Just know that."

"Uh… okay."

There was no point in explaining further; they wouldn't understand anyway.

Only after their horns grew back would they realize the meaning behind my words.

I should pass this message on to the other succubi as well.

There's no telling what help the power to make someone dream might be in the future.

Reina, the previous Succubus Queen, and mother of Airi, used the power of dreams to instill fear in humans and wither them to death.

But Airi uses it to save those who suffer.

"Thanks for at least doing that, Valier."

Airi, upon hearing my words which, depending on the listener, could sound like a cruel joke, smiled brightly.

"Since you said so, it feels like it'll definitely happen… It's a strange feeling."

I wonder what expression Airi will make when her horns truly grow back.

I became a little curious.

Harriet said there might be something we can do.

Olivia said there's no need to do anything, and to just not do anything.

Airi seemed to have changed her thoughts quite a bit from before.

I couldn't tell about her thoughts on humans, but she seemed to shower affection on the children.

Luvien and Gallarush were not in the palace, leaving only Eleris behind.

"Ah… Your Majesty."

Not "Your Highness," but "Your Majesty."

Eleris, who had been in the guest room, addressed me as such, perhaps because I had become king.

Becoming a king took only a single day, it seemed.

I became king not to rebuild the demon world but to address the gate incident that had occurred in the end.

Ultimately, I would not be able to escape the yoke of being the main culprit behind the gate incident.

Would the gate incident have happened in some way or another, no matter what?

If I had done nothing, would the gate incident still have occurred in some way?

I don't know.

However, Eleris is trying to do something as the person directly responsible for causing the gate incident.

Eleris was alone at the table, writing something on a piece of paper.

"What were you doing?"

"Ah… I was… thinking of a new spell."

"A spell?"

At my question, Eleris continued with a gloomy expression.

"There will be many people who have lost their homes… So there will be a need for a place to temporarily house refugees… I was thinking of creating a spell that could create such temporary shelters…"

"Ah."

I couldn't help but see the misery in Eleris's expression.

It was a bizarre act, trying to make amends for the disaster she had caused herself.

She would probably prefer death.

Her attempt to save people had ended up like this, and despite the pressure she was under, Eleris had activated Akasha with her own hands and by her own will, to save me.

I heard that the Akasha used had disappeared.

Since Akasha itself was practically another world, it had not disappeared but had become the gate incident itself.

The gate incident was not something that could be undone.

So the guilt Eleris was feeling now must have been unbearable for her.

Leaving Eleris to die might have been a better choice for her.

I can't imagine the miserable feelings and guilt Eleris must be experiencing as she struggles with the unbearable guilt and works on this task.

Eleris and I would be sinners.

Ellen seemed to think all of this was her fault, but I don't think so.

Even in this situation, I am grateful to the three who believed in me and followed me.

However, I do not blame Ellen and Charlotte for not trusting me. I think it was unbelievable and that there were many reasons to doubt.

Resentment and hatred cannot solve anything. In reality, my enemies are not Ellen or Charlotte, but the monsters of the gate.

Thus, the responsibility for this entire situation lies with Eleris and me.

Eleris seemed to be devising a kind of magic to provide temporary homes for those who had lost theirs.

It would be a small magic, but it is absolutely necessary in the current situation.

That would not be the end of it.

If I had not met Eleris, if I had not encountered the demon spy, the gate incident would not have occurred.

Nevertheless, I told Eleris at the crossroads leading to Akasha that I would not regret everything that had happened.

I decided not to regret, even if our meeting would be remembered as regrettable events.

Though everything became entangled and led us here, I decided not to regret, and so, I do not regret.

"I don't regret."

"…"

At those words, Eleris lowered her head with a disheartened expression.

"Because there must still be something we can do. I don't think the price we have to pay will only bring about bad things."

I placed my hand on Eleris's drooping shoulders.

"Let's try to do whatever we can."

There is nothing I can do about Eleris's guilt.

No matter how much pressure was applied from those around her, Eleris made the

choice.

The world or me.

At the crossroads between the two, Eleris should have chosen the world.

She was definitely such a being.

Regretting the numerous massacres and trying to repay even a small sin, Eleris should have refused to activate Akasha, even if it meant abandoning me.

However, Eleris chose me over the world.

Everyone else may consider Eleris the greatest sinner, and everyone in the world may never forgive her for causing the gate incident.

But I cannot do that.

No matter how much responsibility she felt, no matter how much pressure those around her applied, Eleris made the choice with her own hands.

There is no need to listen to the reasons.

She must have done so because she loved me enough to trade the whole world, because she valued me so much.

Even though it destroyed the world.

To her, who had no choice but to do so because she loved me that much.

Why did you do that?

Shouldn't you have left me to die?

I cannot say such things.

Even if the whole world, and even my own people, come to hate Eleris, who is as good as the source of the tragedies they will face, I cannot.

I must love Eleris.

I must stand by Eleris.

"I'm so… so… sorry. I ruined everything… I ruined your wish…"

"No, it's okay."

It's not okay.

But I must say it's okay.

In Eleris's heart, in this love.

I am grateful.

"Losing you… no… you… I was so… so… scared… I was so sad that everything had to end like this… I was so sorry… so sad… you…"

Crying, Eleris embraced me.

"I didn't want to lose you… no matter what…"

Eleris hugged me and cried for a long time.

I also hugged Eleris.

As if I would never let go again.

CHAPTER 456

The day after conquering the Edina Archipelago.

I had expected that more than half of the nobles and soldiers would flee.

What was truly surprising was that fewer than ten people refused me and disappeared.

The kingdom had been taken from them by the Demon King.

To the people of the Edina royal family, this must have felt like deprivation.

But for the nobles, soldiers, and citizens, it would have a different meaning.

The weak royal family had vanished, and the absolute ruler known as the Demon King now sat in their place.

Besides, this place was an island.

There was nowhere to run. Sailing across the sea to the mainland was only possible for the hardiest of captains and sailors.

Thus, although they were afraid of the new Demon King, they had no choice but to stay, hoping that he wasn't as fearsome as the world perceived him to be.

Therefore, there were hardly any deserters among the majority of the royal nobles and troops. I was rather curious about where the disappeared ones had gone.

In front of me, seated on the throne, a trembling royal administration official in charge of disaster relief began to report various details.

He talked about how many houses were destroyed, how many people were killed, how many people lost their homes, and the state of relief supplies within the castle.

Honestly, I couldn't fully comprehend the information.

I was weak with numbers.

When those countless deaths were translated into numbers, the array of figures seemed more complicated than sad.

"So, can we provide enough relief supplies to the refugees for now?"

"We might manage if we start distributing relief supplies immediately, but there is an overall lack of facilities to accommodate the refugees. The weather is good, so they won't freeze to death, but… we cannot be certain that winter won't come before the large-scale reconstruction is completed."

In this gathering were not only the nobles and soldiers of the Edina Kingdom but also my people.

Harriet and Airi stood at my sides, and except for the absent Gallarush and Luvien, Eleris stood behind me.

Liana was currently sulking, claiming she knew nothing about governing, and although Olivia initially disliked helping others, she went out into the city of Lazak to treat the wounded since I wanted her to.

"How many refugees are there?"

"Approximately eight thousand."

Eight thousand.

Eight thousand people who had completely lost their homes. However, according to the person in charge, more than forty-five thousand people actually needed help.

It seemed like a large number, but if we had been even a little later, the eight thousand who lost their homes could have become forty-five thousand.

"We might need to set up a large-scale refugee camp on the outskirts of the city…"

The nobles' expressions turned gloomy.

They knew it was necessary, but it was not an easy task.

Feeding and housing eight thousand people was an overwhelming thought.

Even if we used all the royal assets, there would eventually be a limit.

Whether they believed it or not, we couldn't engage in trade between continents. Thus, importing materials and food was impossible.

And then there was the construction period.

If we couldn't provide warm sleeping quarters for the refugees before winter arrived, they would all freeze to death.

Food and shelter.

As much as it's a problem for individuals, it becomes a headache when the scale grows larger.

"Eleris, how's that house-building magic coming along?"

"I still need to work on it a bit more… but I think I can have a draft ready within two days."

Everyone seemed astonished by the conversation I had with Eleris from the throne.

House-building magic.

From the beginning, magicians were an extremely rare resource.

There are so many aspiring magicians in the temple that they practically trip over each other.

Thus, while magic can solve problems arising in the southernmost part of the continent, the scarcity and mediocre quality of magicians make it impossible for magic to solve everything.

Since the temple has gathered the best of the best from across the continent, everything seems ordinary.

Just as the knight commander or the royal guard commander is easily subdued by my sword skills, it's incredibly difficult to enjoy the benefits of magic here.

"Even if we were to build houses, we need materials first. How do we provide for that?"

"There are plenty of trees. We can cut them down and use them, and if not, we can use magic to intervene with nature and provide timber, so you don't need to worry about that."

"What about manpower?"

"I think I can handle it all by myself."

The faces of the royal officials begin to contort with shock at the magician's statement that she would single-handedly build temporary housing for the eight thousand refugees in need.

The problems that plague the royal officials are solved by a single magician.

I have three Vampire Lords at my disposal. All of them have already reached the level of archmage.

Moreover, Harriet, who is capable of using magic beyond their wildest imagination, stands at my right.

Magic can provide answers to most problems.

However, it's crucial that only a tiny fraction of people enjoy the benefits of magic.

And receiving the benefits of such powerful archmages is even rarer.

These people will find out within a week that my reign can only be a blessing to the inhabitants of the archipelago.

"What are you so surprised about?"

I laugh as I look at the wide-eyed royal officials.

"I am the Demon King."

Though I began by ruling them with fear, I have no intention of deliberately promoting terror.

There's no particular reason for it.

"Whatever you imagine, you'll see more than that."

In many ways, indeed.

—---

I decided to do what I could.

Of course, I don't have grand goals like creating a very fair, perfect, and citizen-oriented country.

I will build a nation that rolls as I please, a nation where I can do what I want.

I may ultimately wish for the people's peace and well-being, but the fact that I am a dictator will never change.

If necessary, I will conscript, confiscate the citizens' property, and make them move according to my orders.

The first thing I did was to occupy the Edina Archipelago.

Although the gate incident was resolved in the early stages, emergency measures must be taken for the four damaged ports.

And the next phase proceeds simultaneously.

I chose the Edina Archipelago as a base because, if I suppress the four gates here, I can have a place unaffected by the gate incidents happening on the continent.

Many cities will be destroyed, people will die, and a significant amount of land will become uninhabited wastelands where monsters roam.

There are numerous towns and cities without gates.

They suffer additional damage as the monsters from the gates spread.

Protecting such places is difficult. Monsters will continue to pour out, and although my forces will soon be replenished, they are limited.

So the next goal is to rescue people from the continent and relocate them to the Edina Archipelago.

We need to save the survivors from the cities and villages that could collapse at any moment and those who have survived the monsters, and relocate them to the Edina Archipelago, which is free from the influence of the gate incidents.

The warp gate system is not available.

So, people needed to be physically moved.

Next, I gathered the fleet masters of the massive fleets that remained in the Edina Archipelago.

As expected, the fleet masters who saw the throne of the Edina Archipelago become the Demon King's possession were filled with astonishment.

"As the ruler of the Edina Archipelago and the king of the demon world, I hereby conscript all ships, captains, and sailors from this moment on."

Don't assume that I will be a benevolent ruler.

I will take what I need if necessary.

"Speak up if you have any objections."

I was not an ordinary king, but a horned demon.

An Archdemon.

I would fully utilize the fear that stemmed from my name.

They would imagine that if they disobeyed my command, they might face something worse than death.

That imagination would also help my reign.

Naturally, everyone was too frightened to raise any objections, trembling in fear.

"First, we will organize three fleets. The purpose of each fleet is to accommodate

refugees from the three ports that were affected this time and relocate them here to Lazak."

Though the fleet masters were pale and terrified, as if they were about to be devoured alive, they all nodded their heads when I told them that I was doing this to accommodate the refugees.

"Next, we will organize a large-scale fleet of the greatest size and send it to the continent."

Upon hearing my words, their expressions became strange at the thought of heading to the continent that had already become hell.

"Soon, my army will cross the ocean and come here. The fleets will be responsible for periodically transporting people from the continent and my soldiers back and forth."

Gallarush was currently at the base in the Gelkorgis Desert, gathering followers of the Demon God Cult.

It was not possible to teleport all of them using Mass Teleport.

That's why we were organizing a large-scale fleet to relocate them to the Edina Archipelago and place them under my management.

The archipelago wouldn't be teeming with people.

Fortunately, there were many uninhabited islands in the Edina Archipelago.

There was plenty of land.

So, all we had to do was clear and develop the land so people could live there.

A place where people could live without worrying about monsters after escaping the calamity of the continent.

The Edina Archipelago would become a refuge for people.

"In the long term, we will expand and develop the uninhabited islands of the Edina Archipelago into habitable lands for people."

I wasn't sure if we could turn a temporary refugee shelter into a major country in the south, using the small islands.

However, I hoped that these distant islands would serve as a veil for people to hide from danger.

I desired it and would make it so.

That was not all.

The demons in the remote areas.

They might not be directly affected by the Gate Incident, but they could be affected in the long term.

I would also need to subdue them and incorporate them into my forces.

And the ports connecting the Edina Archipelago to the continent.

Since the Gate Incident likely occurred there as well, I needed to start taking action for those places.

I would organize an army to eliminate the monsters overflowing on the continent, carry out operations to clear the ports on the continent, and establish bases there.

There was so much to do.

Too much.

Far too much.

—---

In the middle of a ruined city,

-Whoosh-

Atop a mountain of corpses, Ellen Artorius drew her sword.

On the massive pile of flesh intertwined with human and monster corpses, Ellen

slowly rose after cutting off the last monster's breath.

Atop a mountain of corpses, Ellen surveyed the scene around her.

Between the charred remains of buildings, the Imperial Army was just finishing up the battle.

In the eyes of the soldiers watching Ellen descend, there was a mix of awe, respect, admiration, and fear.

She had ventured alone into the ruins of the once-great city, slaughtering dangerous monsters and cooperating with the main force in battle.

It wasn't an exaggeration to say that she had practically carried out the monster extermination mission in the city by herself.

"Are, are you alright, hero…?"

"Yes."

With a cold and indifferent demeanor, as if she couldn't be bothered by anything, Ellen nodded her head.

From a distance, someone approached Ellen.

"Aren't you okay? Don't you need to rest? You haven't slept in days."

It was Ellen's classmate, Heinrich von Schwarz. Ellen shook her head at the concerned words of her classmate.

“…I'm fine."

As a pyrokinetic, Heinrich was responsible for disposing of the corpses now that the battle was over, so he advised her to get some rest while she had the chance and then headed off somewhere.

Given the regrettable state of the empire, capable combat students from the temple were being deployed all over the continent to deal with the ongoing monster extermination missions.

Countless soldiers, knights, and students had died.

For not believing in the Demon King, humanity was paying a heavy price.

Two years after the Gate Incident.

Humanity had yet to reclaim all their lands.

Having seen so much death, Ellen's eyes were hollow, numb to the deaths of both monsters and allies alike.

In one corner of the burning city, Ellen saw a group of refugees carrying bundles, moving under the guidance of the soldiers.

"Were there… survivors?"

The soldiers shook their heads at Ellen's question. It was unlikely that any survivors could have lasted this long in the ruined city.

"They're not survivors but refugees. They were found on the outskirts of the city."

"Ah…"

"They say strange things."

"…Strange things?"

At Ellen's question, the soldier wore an ambiguous expression.

"Yes, they say there's a paradise to the south… They were heading south in search of it."

Paradise.

Ellen looked around her.

The burning streets, the piles of corpses like mountains.

Soldiers and knights who had become so accustomed to the death strewn about that they no longer even retched at the sight.

Hell was the present world, and people had become inhabitants of a hell they had grown used to.

Where in this hell could there be talk of paradise?

A world that might have been a paradise before was now destroyed, as if by her own hands.

Where in this world could one find paradise and respite?

With the world full of despair, people began to believe in strange things. Somewhere, there might be hope.

Ellen was someone responsible for this hell.

That's why she couldn't rest.

She didn't believe in a nonexistent paradise; her only role was to erase the hell from the world, bit by bit.

With that in mind, Ellen set off in search of her next mission.

CHAPTER 457

There were hardly any intact nations left.

"Your Majesty, we have received news that the special task force led by Ellen Artorius has successfully reclaimed the territory of Lambator."

“…Good. That's good news."

From the throne in Central Palace, Bertus nodded his head slowly, a faint smile playing on his lips.

Last month, Emperor Nelliod de Gardias had passed away.

Though the previous emperor had survived the great war known as the Great Demon War, his strength had begun to wane after the Gate Incident, and he ultimately succumbed to death.

A sense of responsibility, guilt, and overwhelming pressure had led to the emperor's demise.

Bertus de Gardias inherited the throne without even a proper coronation ceremony.

He had taken the emperor's position he had long desired in a manner he had never wanted.

The twilight of humanity.

In this indescribable moment, Bertus was waging a war that would determine the fate of humankind.

Purposeless monsters roamed the continent, moving only to kill humans.

Negotiations and diplomacy were impossible.

It was a war with the sole purpose of mutual annihilation.

Everyone bore some responsibility for this situation.

The Demon King himself.

The Demon King's minions who activated Akasha to save him.

The empire that could not trust the Demon King's words.

However, most people only knew the superficial fact that the incident was caused by the Demon King, without knowing the detailed circumstances.

Only a few, including the High Priests of the Five Holy Religions, the Holy Knights' Commander, some of the imperial family, and Ellen, knew the truth.

After the Gate Incident, the situation had been desperate, but there had been progress.

"Your Majesty, the Shanafel 1st Special Forces, led by Saviolin Turner, has successfully destroyed the Warp Gate in the capital Hashfel of the Haig Kingdom."

“…Good."

If Ellen Artorius's task force was responsible for exterminating all monsters in the ruined cities, Saviolin Turner had an even more dangerous mission: to arrive in the already-ruined cities first, destroy the Warp Gates that released the monsters, and then escape.

Ellen worked for regional recovery, while Saviolin Turner carried out the preparatory work for it.

Both undertook extremely dangerous missions.

Their roles were crucial at this moment.

As the undisputed strongest human, Saviolin Turner, and Ellen Artorius, the savior of humanity with two relics.

In a world where Olivia Lanze and the Demon King had disappeared with the relics, they played the role of hope for humanity.

Not only for their abilities, but they were also two powerful pillars supporting the desperate humans.

The belief that Ellen Artorius would save humanity.

Of the Five Holy Religions, Tu'an and Als had chosen the Demon King and those who disappeared with him.

As a result, the Warrior Church that believed Ellen Artorius as a prophet had begun to erode the popular faith, resulting in a bitter irony.

The power of the empire had declined, and numerous vassal states had collapsed.

Those nations that maintained their lifelines were barely protecting their capitals and a few key cities.

All the Warp Gates on the continent had to be destroyed, and the monsters from the other world scattered everywhere had to be annihilated.

The rebuilding of humanity would begin after that.

But would that day ever come?

'Reinhardt… '

Bertus gritted his teeth.

'Yes, I was wrong. I was wrong about everything, from one to ten.'

He hadn't believed it because it was simply unbelievable.

As a result, he had to stand on the brink of humanity's downfall and rebuilding at every moment.

The Imperial Capital was filled with makeshift shantytowns, teeming with refugees from vast regions.

Those who had barely escaped the clutches of monsters and the rescued people couldn't be left behind, so they were brought to the capital for the time being.

They had to survive somehow within the various parts of the capital.

Aid was severely insufficient, and with no bread to give them, criminals inevitably emerged in great numbers.

Thus, the shantytowns beyond the capital's borders were rife with crime.

The possibility that these people might suddenly turn into bandits and raid the Imperial Palace at any time could not be ignored.

However, if all the bandits were killed, where could the legitimacy of the empire be found?

In the two years since the Gate Incident, the size of Imperial Capital had more than tripled due to the influx of refugees.

Monsters that had left the Gate and wandered the land had reached the outskirts of the Imperial Capital, frequently attacking the peripheral areas.

And that wasn't the only problem.

The refugees in the shantytowns were mostly people who had received help from the empire.

Many of them had directly experienced the heroism of Ellen Artorius.

Ellen had saved numerous lives by defeating hundreds of monsters.

Hence, the majority of the refugees believed in the Hero Religion.

"Persecution of the believers of Tu’an and Als… is going too far."

“…Indeed."

Tiamata and Alsbringer had chosen the Demon King.

Although followers of the Hero Religion didn't like the other five major religions, they treated the Tu'an and Als churches as if they were the Demon King's religions.

It was common for believers of the two churches to be stoned to death, and cases of

verbal abuse towards priests of the Tu'an church, dispatched to treat the injured, were frequent.

An intangible faith was being gradually replaced by the powerful presence of Ellen Artorius.

Another problem stemmed from the faith in the Hero Religion.

"Your Majesty… Forgive my insolence…"

The expression on the minister's face indicated that he knew what Bertus was thinking.

"Has another protest erupted, demanding Charlotte be handed over?"

"…Yes."

The furious followers of the Hero Religion wanted a scapegoat.

Charlotte de Gardias, who was undoubtedly cursed by the Demon King.

The followers had already spread rumors that Charlotte was not only cursed but also a collaborator of the Demon King and should be killed.

The protest demanding the death of the princess had already gained the support of many.

Killing the princess would change nothing, as the most important enemy was the Demon King.

However, people couldn't find the Demon King, so they wanted a scapegoat.

They were shouting that Charlotte de Gardias, the collaborator of the Demon King, must die.

The only reason the followers of the Hero Religion hadn't taken more extreme actions beyond the protests was simple.

Charlotte's guardian knight was Ellen Artorius, the savior of humanity whom they worshiped.

As Ellen's heroism increased, so did the faith in the Hero Religion, putting Charlotte's life in more danger.

However, because of this, Ellen's fame also served as a shield protecting Charlotte in a bizarre twist of fate.

After completing his morning duties, Bertus visited the Spring Palace.

Entering the Spring Palace, which was heavily guarded despite its small numbers, Bertus headed straight to Charlotte's bedroom.

Inside the bedroom, his sibling, Charlotte de Gardias, sat motionless in the darkness.

For some time now, Charlotte had been in that state, unable to return to her original self.

"Sibling."

"…"

Charlotte turned her head listlessly, looking at Bertus.

With her black hair and red demonic eyes, Charlotte was in a situation where she could not go outside.

To anyone who saw her, even to Bertus who wanted to protect her, it was clear that Charlotte's appearance was the result of the Demon King's curse.

In reality, Bertus knew that it was even more horrifying because the Demon King's soul had fused with Charlotte's.

It wasn't that she had been cursed by the Demon King, but rather that his soul had taken residence within her.

If the truth were revealed, the crowd would surely go mad.

Who would believe that Charlotte, in her demonic form, was innocent if she were placed before a multitude of people?

Who would trust Princess Charlotte, who embodied the very essence of

ominousness?

"Have you eaten anything?" Bertus asked.

Charlotte quietly shook her head in response.

Bertus pulled up a chair and sat beside Charlotte's bed.

After the Gate incident, monsters appeared from the hidden Gate in the basement of the Spring Palace.

Charlotte destroyed the Gate and eliminated the monsters with her own power.

However, after the situation had somewhat settled, Bertus explained everything to Charlotte.

It seemed that the Demon King had truly intended to prevent this situation.

Though his minions were certainly responsible for the incident, Reinhardt, the Demon King, appeared to not want this outcome.

The despairing sibling who had been manipulated by the Demon King from beginning to end wondered if she could ever return to her original form.

She hadn't been manipulated, Bertus insisted.

It was hard to believe, but Reinhardt had truly acted for the sake of humanity and Charlotte.

Bertus hoped that this would help her in some way.

However, in the end, it turned out to be the greatest mistake.

As if regretting the words she had spoken.

Unable to catch her breath, Charlotte wept and eventually lost consciousness.

From then on, the awakened Charlotte began to act as if she had almost lost the ability to speak.

Whether it was because of the sins committed through words or not, she hardly spoke beyond the bare minimum.

However, Charlotte could not leave her room in the Spring Palace and did not even try to leave on her own.

Bertus could somewhat guess that this was due to her regret over the countless curses she had hurled at the Demon King, feeling betrayed by him.

She had been used by the Demon King.

And so, she had poured curses upon the person who had saved her life multiple times, wishing him the most miserable death.

There were more than a few, like Ellen, who believed that all of this was their responsibility, and Charlotte was one of them.

In shock and guilt, Charlotte suffered.

With her cursed, terrifying appearance, she could not help anyone, nor could she even take a single step outside the Spring Palace.

And so, Charlotte slowly sank into darkness in the place where spring should have been.

The crowd wanted Charlotte dead.

As their hatred for the Demon King grew, so did their hatred for Charlotte.

If the people reached a breaking point, demanding her death as a substitute for the Demon King's, she might truly become a sacrificial lamb.

Bertus quietly held Charlotte's emaciated hand.

It was so frail.

"Sister…"

"…"

She had once been a rival he loathed enough to want to kill, but at some point, she had become so pitiful that he could no longer hate her.

Two years after the Gate incident.

Now, Bertus wanted to protect Charlotte in any way he could.

However, there may come a day when he would have to hand Charlotte over to the crowd with his own hands.

Despite not wanting her dead anymore, he might be forced to make the decision to kill Charlotte himself.

Charlotte and the Empire

Given the choice, Bertus would have to choose the Empire when weighed against the two.

Because that's what the Emperor must do.

"Even I… lately… am struggling…”

Bertus left his seat after uttering those words.

After Bertus left, Charlotte silently gazed out the window of the spring palace.

Even if the world were to be destroyed.

Even if the fate of humanity hung in the balance.

Dark storm clouds filled her heart, and the darkness threatened to swallow her whole.

Yet the sunlight remained dazzling.

—---

While Ellen bore the responsibility of being humanity's hope and faced the monsters, the other students of the Temple were also engaged in battle, each entrusted with their own missions.

-Kyaaaak!

"Heup!"

Facing a three-headed snake that was slithering towards him on the ground, Ludwig dodged the attack with agile movements and swung his sword towards the snake's heads.

-Skeek!

Ludwig, enveloped in a burning blue Magic Body Strengthening, cut off one of the snake's heads and, as another head attempted to bite his arm, he deliberately let it bite him.

-Kak!

Instead, Ludwig thrust his burning hand into the snake's mouth, simultaneously ripping out its tongue and cutting off the remaining head.

-Thunk!

The three-headed snake's body writhed on the ground, and Ludwig stepped back, sweating cold sweat.

"Huuh… huuh…"

"Ludwig! Above!"

"Huh?"

As soon as he had dealt with the giant snake, a huge flying monster began to dive from the sky towards Ludwig, its sharp talons extended.

But just before the monster's talons could reach Ludwig, a burst of flame struck its head.

-Kukkak!

The monster's body staggered from the explosion and crashed onto the ground beside Ludwig, thrashing about.

"Heup!"

Without hesitation, Ludwig plunged his sword into the flying monster's head, and it soon stopped flailing.

"Huuh… Thanks, Delfin."

"Be careful, you keep forgetting there's more than one or two monsters."

"I know…"

Ludwig wiped the blood and oil from his sword and looked around.

The students of the Temple were engaged in battle, although their missions were not as dangerous as Ellen's.

"But these spirits, they're really fascinating."

Ludwig spoke as he gazed at the mysterious lifeforms floating beside Delfin Izzard, neither ghosts nor monsters.

"As long as they're helpful in this situation."

The spirit that had just struck the flying monster was a bird-shaped being wreathed in flames, floating at Delfin's right side.

As the Gate incident unfolded and battles commenced, Delfin Izzard, originally talented in archery, participated in the battlefield using his bow.

But when Ludwig almost lost his life to a monster, Delfin summoned a spirit to protect him from the attack.

Neither Delfin nor the Empire knew what spirits were.

They could only guess that it was a kind of supernatural power, an unexplainable force.

Delfin did not know why the spirits were helping him.

The Empire was interested in spirit magic, but there was no time to study it.

As the world's only spirit mage, Delfin Izzard summoned spirits of wind, fire, and lightning to fight.

'Reinhardt… '

With his sword in hand, Ludwig headed for the next battleground.

Clenching his teeth, he stepped over the broken buildings and corpses of dead soldiers.

'Someday, I will make you pay for all of this.'

There were still many who were unaware of the controlled truth.

Therefore, the world overflowed with those who hated the Demon King.

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Beyond the horizon, masts began to rise one by one.

"How many were there the last time we saw them?"

"Probably… around eight hundred?"

Hearing my question, Harriet tilted her head for a moment before answering.

Monster extermination and civilian rescue operations on the continent.

After escorting the refugees to Port Mokna, which connects the continent and Edina Archipelago, we put them on ships and send them to the archipelago.

My forces on the continent continued to evacuate homeless wanderers and refugees, sending them to the Edina Archipelago by ship.

The empire didn't know I had established a base in the Edina Archipelago.

Port Mokna wasn't that important of a port, and the empire had many other places to worry about.

"We should have explained better. I'm tired of seeing people panic and jump into the

water as soon as they disembark."

"They'll manage on their own."

"I really hope so."

The Edina Archipelago was no ordinary place.

First of all, its leader, me, was the Demon King.

And among those walking the streets, some were demons.

From various demon races such as orcs and goblins, to succubi, and although not as numerous, even ogres were living in the Edina Archipelago.

I was tired of seeing people, rescued by strangers and brought across the vast ocean, scream in terror, thinking they were going to be devoured by demons.

Thankfully, the inhabitants of the archipelago had become accustomed to the sight of demons walking around calmly.

Of course, occasionally, children would wet themselves at the sight of an orc or ogre.

Fortunately, without any major visible conflicts, demons and humans had not completely assimilated but were living together without major issues.

There was no absence of dissatisfaction and fear.

However, as rumors of the hellish continent spread with the arrival of refugees, such dissatisfaction quickly faded.

Everyone knew that refusing my rule and fleeing back to the continent meant certain death.

Harriet and I stood on the dock of Lazak. I was at the very front, and many people were waiting to guide the incoming refugees from the soon-to-arrive ship.

The port had already been a large trading city, but now, with huge fleets carrying refugees instead of trade goods, its size had grown considerably.

While waiting for the ship to arrive, Harriet and I watched a figure approach through the transparent seawater.

"Ah, over there…"

"Yes."

Soon, something came up close to us, revealing only its upper body from the water.

"Your Majesty, we have prepared the food you requested on the western shore. It will be carried here by the current soon."

The creature had a human upper body and a fish-like lower body.

A mermaid.

"Good, have the people wait there. You always do a great job."

"It's not a problem. It's an honor for us to serve you."

As sea-dwelling demons, mermaids couldn't become servants of the Demon King.

However, now the coast was my base.

The mermaids, who hadn't been hostile towards humans, quickly became solid allies upon making contact with me.

They always took on the role of collecting marine food resources in these times of food scarcity.

Their efficiency was incomparable to that of fishermen, and they were essentially responsible for the food situation in the Edina Archipelago, especially in Lazak.

The red-haired mermaid, in the form of a woman, soon dove back into the water and disappeared, swimming smoothly through the water like an arrow. Harriet stared blankly at the sight of the mermaid gliding beneath the surface.

"Mermaids are… really beautiful, aren't they?"

As Harriet had said, the mermaids were even more beautiful creatures than I had

imagined. I hadn't even known they existed in the first place.

Of course, it took quite a while of nagging for them to cover their naked upper bodies when they approached me, at least with some seaweed.

Just now, one had appeared with something resembling kelp wrapped around her chest.

As for the demons, putting their dominance ability aside, they would have died for my word. It seemed as though they were moved just by seeing my face.

So, the demons were unconditionally on my side.

Anyway, it was true that the mermaids were beautiful.

"Indeed, they are."

"…"

At my words, Harriet stared at me intently.

What's wrong?

Is she angry?

"No, well… You said it first…!"

"Whatever. You're a fool."

Ships appeared on the horizon, approaching the Edina Archipelago.

The Edina Archipelago was a place where its distance from the continent was a critical disadvantage, but in this situation, it could serve as a refuge for all beings affected by the gate incident.

One by one, the ships entered the harbor, and the refugees disembarked under the guidance of the soldiers.

Fortunately, the captains and crew had explained the situation well, so although the refugees seemed fearful among the demons, they didn't scream or try to flee.

They were people who had seen hell on the continent. They had nowhere else to go, and they had been drifting aimlessly, avoiding monsters.

The only option they had in their uncertain lives was to live among the demons.

The refugees would stay in temporary shelters for a while.

As they followed their guides, they arrived at the entrance of the massive temporary shelter, where succubi were waiting.

All of the succubi had regrown their horns, which had been cut off previously, and their numbers had increased significantly.

Due to my Word Magic, the horns of the succubi, which should not have regrown, were all restored.

Among the succubi were those who had stayed with Airi, but many had also returned to the Darklands.

I brought back the succubi who had gone to the Darklands.

The refugees, captivated by the appearance of the succubi with regrown horns, stared blankly at them despite their fear of the demons.

Harriet was no exception.

"Who would have ever imagined that succubi could do something like this…"

As Harriet said, it was an unbelievable situation.

The succubi were now performing something similar to psychological therapy.

CHAPTER 458

Most of these people had lost their families, and had escaped from the clutches of grotesque monsters whose mere appearance could inflict lifelong trauma.

Naturally, their mental states were far from stable.

They had fled for their lives, and while on the run, there was no time to dwell on such matters. But once they reached the Edina Archipelago and could live without the immediate threat to their lives, the people were hit hard by the aftermath.

In fact, countless people, after arriving at the Edina Archipelago, took their own lives, thinking about what they had lost.

As Airi had said, it was something that allowed them to escape from the hellish reality, if only for a moment.

The effect was greater than anyone could have imagined.

It gave them peaceful dreams to comfort their souls.

Although there was the side effect of refugees becoming addicted to the succubi as if they were drugs, in the end, it was clear that it provided them a brief moment of mental peace after experiencing hell.

Thus, it began with the succubi counseling each refugee individually, listening to their stories, and adjusting their dreams as needed to prevent nightmares.

Originally, the reputation of the succubi, including Airi, was at rock bottom in Lazak, the capital of the Edina Archipelago.

When it was revealed that they were not even human but succubi, public opinion turned hostile.

But not to the refugees.

To the refugees, the succubi who greeted them with gentle smiles, listened to their

stories, and comforted them upon arriving in the terrifying land inhabited by demons could only be seen as angels in the form of demons.

As a result, the refugees liked the succubi more than the Demon King, and they loved Airi, the Succubus Queen, who led them even more.

What are dreams?

Despite knowing that the small respite found in dreams cannot change reality, people yearn for happy dreams and love the succubi who grant them.

Humans can be controlled by dreams other than nightmares.

During this time, both the succubi and I had learned something new.

"Your Majesty, all personnel have disembarked."

The one who came to me was a pale-faced individual in a black robe.

"Well done."

All ships operated by sails had a fixed sailing speed.

Since ships had started to sink with refugees in the turbulent seas, I had assigned one vampire mage from the Vampire Lord clan to each ship as a person in charge.

With the help of the mage, the ships could safely sail through rough seas and travel faster in calm waters.

"And they say that the Thunder King will soon return."

“…Ah. I see, alright."

With that, the convoy leader retreated.

Harriet watched the retreating figure of the vampire, her lips quivering.

"I wonder if Liana likes… that nickname…?"

"If she didn't like it, she'd definitely show her displeasure. She must like it."

"Maybe…?"

Despite the talk of the Four Heavenly Kings, people began calling Liana de Granz the Thunder King.

And seeing that she didn't object to it, it seemed like she secretly liked it.

Liana was responsible for rescuing refugees and defending the base at Port Mokna, the continent connection point to the Edina Archipelago.

Thus, the majority of the refugee rescues were actually Liana's responsibility.

On the continent, it was Liana.

Upon arrival at the archipelago, it was Airi.

Both of them took responsibility for the refugees in their own way.

"The disembarkation seems to be finished."

“…Already?"

Harriet had thought it would take quite some time, but the refugees had already completed the disembarkation process.

Harriet tilted her head slightly.

"It seems like there are fewer of them… Hmm… or not?"

"Nothing unusual happened. Let's go back."

"Okay."

This group of refugees had arrived safely without any particular issues or commotions.

Although there had been no extreme problems recently thanks to solid pre-arrival education, there had been many serious issues at the beginning.

Some were scared and tried to run away, while others rampaged, threatening to kill

everyone upon arrival.

These people argued that they couldn't possibly live under the rule of the Demon King, who was the cause of all this.

Technically, it wasn't a wrong argument, and there were people who vented their anger with such reasoning.

And they knew that such discontent and hatred still lurked among the people.

Some people would rather die than live under the protection of the Demon King, knowing that he was the cause of all these problems.

However, their anger and hatred couldn't be expressed in front of me.

They knew that there was no alternative to me.

No one would try to do something on their own, unless they were prepared to die.

Of course, that's not to say there weren't any.

I never made any excuses or defenses for myself.

All I did was rescue them from the continent, provide them with shelter and food, and help them become part of the archipelago.

After taking care of them in temporary shelters for some time, they were sent to pioneering settlements on Edina Island or other islands.

Whether they liked it or not, they had to start a new life in the places we assigned.

Providing free food and accommodation was only temporary; we couldn't take responsibility for them for their entire lives.

Just as these people had to get used to the sight of demons living among them, they had to accept my rule, which was the root of all these problems.

I was aware that this intense anger and hatred could turn into a knife at my throat, but they knew that if they took that course, there would be no future for them.

They knew that their sustenance was maintained by the labor of demons, which was almost like voluntary service.

Of course, not everyone was like that.

"Oh, His Majesty the Demon King…"

"He must be out on inspection…"

A few of those who encountered me on the street bowed their heads deeply and did not raise them until I had passed by.

There were many who believed that the rumor of the Gate Incident being caused by me was a baseless lie spread by the empire.

After all, if I had caused it, there would be no reason for me to rescue and feed these humans.

Many people believed that the rumors about the Demon King were all false, and that the true Demon King was a benevolent being.

In reality, I was the one who quelled all of the Gate Incidents that occurred in this land and the archipelago on the first day, thus saving the entire archipelago.

I didn't speak of the truth or the lies.

From the beginning, I didn't become their king by gaining their support.

I ruled them with my power and maintained my throne with that power.

If the opposing forces grew too strong, I had the power to suppress them.

So whether the citizens hated or revered me, it didn't matter to me.

Some people hated me, while others revered me.

In truth, this has always happened in every nation throughout history.

After returning to the royal palace, in the main hall.

"Your Majesty, a murder has occurred in the southern district of the refugee camp."

“…Really?"

The fact that public order was unstable inevitably led to news of such crimes reaching me.

A murder case.

But upon hearing those words, I didn't feel shocked. Instead, I furrowed my brows, wondering what troublesome news it would be this time, and somehow, it no longer felt strange.

"Last night, two adult men got into an argument, resulting in one stabbing the other to death with a dagger. The perpetrator is currently in custody with the camp's security forces."

“…Investigate and if the crime is heinous, kill him. If not, send him to the labor camp."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

It wasn't surprising that the refugees' violent tendencies would suddenly surface.

They had come this far in dire straits, and their circumstances wouldn't allow for much generosity. Petty theft was uncountable, and extreme cases like this appeared frequently.

The important thing was that we couldn't establish a large-scale prison to accommodate them.

"Your Majesty, an officer in charge of the farmland beyond the eastern district of the refugee camp was caught stealing crops…”

"Send him to the labor camp."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

With the shortage of prisons to detain criminals, they inevitably received worse treatment than refugees.

Most of the prisoners were not held in prisons, but in large-scale isolation facilities, forced to perform labor. It was better to use them as laborers than to kill them and silence them.

At some point, everything started to seem like mere numbers.

"Your Majesty, last night…"

"Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty…"

"Your Majesty."

Literally.

I thought I would go insane.

After the administrative report was over, and as we walked down the hallway, Harriet cautiously asked.

"Why not take a few days off? I can handle the administration for a few days."

"I can't because you'll do better than me."

At my words, Harriet narrowed her eyes.

"Why? Isn't it good to do well?"

"Well, if you're faster at processing tasks and making wise decisions than me, what do you think those below us would think?"

"Ah…"

If the secretary below the king does a better job at ruling than the king himself, then naturally, distrust towards me would arise.

Of course, Harriet would make better decisions and process matters more swiftly than me in dealing with these headache-inducing issues.

"If you were to do this for the rest of your life, I would have nothing to say. But if it's just for a few days, it's better not to do it at all. For both your sake and mine."

It wasn't just out of a desire for power, but if I were to hand over the throne to Harriet completely, she would have to do this for the rest of her life.

If people were to witness Harriet's exceptional abilities while she filled in for me for a few days, they couldn't help but think of the moments when she had been in charge.

I mustn't let someone so outstanding take my place unless I intend to give it to them entirely.

"You're right. I hadn't considered that. I just thought you looked really tired…"

Harriet gently placed her hand on my forehead. Her slightly cold hand touched my skin.

Did I have a fever?

I wasn't sure.

"Hey, you cunning kid. How many times have I told you not to use your position to bother our majesty?"

Harriet's expression soured at the words that came from the end of the hallway.

It was Olivia Lanze, wearing a gray priest's robe.

"Ah, that sister is here again…"

"What, am I not allowed to come here?"

"Why does someone who should be at the substitution temple keep hanging around the royal palace?"

"You think I'm just going to let you lock me away in the substitution temple and have a good time with our majesty? You think I wouldn't know that you're dying to do that?"

"What are you even saying? You're despicable."

I watched blankly as the approaching Olivia and Harriet locked eyes in a heated stare.

Liana was a key combatant on the front lines.

Airi tended to the trauma of the refugees.

Harriet was my advisor and secretary, always at my side offering opinions.

"I have to give a sermon to the refugees who arrived today. I just came by to see our majesty's face before that."

Olivia Lanze was in charge of the Unified Holy Church.

So, in other words:

A religion similar to Protestantism was the mainstream faith on the Edina Archipelago, and Olivia Lanze was the leader of that church.

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The Demon God Cult forces that had been hiding in the Gelkorgis Desert.

According to Olivia's information, the Lord of Friday, Gallarush, had led them from the desert to the southern part of the continent.

The Demon King had created a country in the distant southern seas and had welcomed the Demon God Cult followers as citizens.

He had been able to organize a large fleet and bring tens of thousands of Demon God Cult followers to the archipelago.

However, of course, there were bound to be complications.

Their way of worship seemed bizarre even to me.

Primitive or cruel, perhaps?

From cannibalism to human sacrifices, they did all sorts of strange things in the name of pleasing the Demon God.

Naturally, this bred resentment, especially since they were not ordinary worshippers of the Five Great Gods but Demon God Cult followers engaging in such activities on a daily basis. They could never integrate with the general public.

So, under my orders, Olivia Lanze conducted a large-scale reformation of the Demon God Cult.

They saw me, the Demon King, as the representative of the Demon God.

They believed that I had been chosen by the two holy relics because the Gods and Demon Gods were, in fact, the same beings.

A long-standing misunderstanding.

Demons did not believe in demon-gods.

Believers of the Five Great Gods simply believed, but within the misunderstanding of humans, the peculiar faith of the Demon God was born. Nevertheless, the origin of their beliefs was fundamentally the same.

Hence, this was not a religious reformation, but rather an endeavor to unravel the age-old misunderstanding between humans and demons.

Naturally, neither the existing followers of the Five Great Gods nor the followers of the Demon God eagerly welcomed the idea of religious reformation.

Yet, I was chosen as the representative of the Demon God by the Great Gods themselves.

Furthermore, the fact that Olivia Lanze could use the divine powers of both Tu’an and Kier simultaneously served as evidence.

The followers of the Five Great Gods had to accept the Demon God.

The Demon God's followers had to understand that the Five Great Gods were, in fact, their true gods.

Therefore, they had to realize there was no need for cannibalism, human sacrifice, torture, or asceticism.

In this manner, we proceeded to unify the religions of the Five Great Gods and the Demon God.

The process was far from smooth.

There was fierce resistance from extremists, both among the priests of the Five Great Gods in the Edina Archipelago and among the followers of the Demon God.

These people, who had been taught to hate one another, had to accept that their roots were the same.

Consequently, many extremists from both the Demon God's followers and the Five Great Gods' followers claimed that Olivia Lanze and I were false prophets.

However, power was on our side.

I suppressed the extremists.

Those who insisted on adhering to absurd traditions were turned into the human sacrifices they so desperately desired.

Priests who shouted for heretical inquisitions were captured and tortured until they admitted the truth. They were made to preach in the public square, acknowledging the correctness of my words and that the Great Gods and the Demon Gods were the same entity.

Although there was no extreme massacre, many people had to die.

The religious reformation of Olivia and me was concluded as evidence emerged.

Among them were those who accepted that the roots of the Demon Gods and the Five Great Gods were the same, including priests from both religions.

As a result of sincerely believing and understanding this, priests who could wield the power of the Demon God emerged, just like Olivia Lanze.

Priests of the Five Great Gods could now use the power of the Demon Gods, and

those of the Demon God could use the power of the Great Gods.

This was evidence in itself.

The priests had to understand that these phenomena were undeniable evidence and proof of the truth.

The Great Gods and the Demon Gods were the same entity.

Different beliefs about the same entity generated different powers.

Within this new understanding, the priests established a new religious concept called the Unified Holy Church, and Olivia Lanze became its leader.

In the Edina Archipelago, it was now common knowledge that the Great Gods and the Demon Gods were the same.

And spreading this truth and providing people with a new sanctuary of faith was the mission entrusted to Olivia.

Airi took care of short-term and extreme traumas.

The new faith, the Unified Holy Church, provided long-term solace for the heart.

Ideological changes occur easily in extreme situations, and within two years, the mainstream faith in the Edina Archipelago had become the Unified Holy Church.

The followers of the Demon God occasionally posed problems, but they no longer engaged in acts like cannibalism or human sacrifice. As the representative of the Great Gods, my command was obeyed by the followers of the Demon God.

In the end, the Demon God's followers were also human, and their integration was not overly difficult.

However, they were an army.

The priests of the Edina Archipelago and the power of the Five Great Gods' religious order were not that great to begin with.

The majority of the Demon God's priests now made up my own army, capable of

using the divine power of the Great Gods.

It was true that a considerable number of the Demon God's priests had been dispatched to Fort Mokna.

Even from my perspective, the Demon God's priests, who could simultaneously use the powers of healing and curses, appeared as if they were the embodiment of some indescribable horror.

Watching them, I couldn't help but wonder if this was really okay.

In the end, everyone was busy living their own lives.

As Liana had said, looking at everyone taking on significant roles, it seemed there was hardly any difference between us and the Four Heavenly Kings.

Three of the Four Heavenly Kings in the demon realm were humans, after all.

Was this really alright?

Considering that, among the previous Heavenly Kings, Larken Simonstite was also human, it didn't seem like such a strange occurrence.

"Anyway, I'll be going. Your Majesty, don't overdo it yourself."

Olivia and I exchanged a few words, and she quickly left the palace due to a sermon schedule.

Although she was the leader of the Unified Holy Church, Olivia was, in effect, the person responsible for a very important aspect of the military power I possessed. On top of that, she was in charge of civilian political projects.

She was a religious leader, the Minister of Defense, and the person responsible for public projects all at once.

Without Olivia, my regime wouldn't collapse, but I would likely die from overwork.

With a sigh, Harriet watched Olivia's departing figure and narrowed her eyes.

"There will be an Elder Council meeting soon."

At Harriet's words, I nodded.

The Elder Council.

It had now become another name for the Vampire Council.

CHAPTER 459

The Royal Palace of Edina, Council Chamber.

There, four of the five clan lords, excluding Lucinil, were seated.

“Your Majesty.”

“It has been a while. Great Being.”

Eleris claimed to be my subordinate, but the other three were not in a hierarchical relationship with me. They did their best to help me, but it was only cooperation, not submission.

Of course, Luvien, Gallarush, and Antirianus had moved all their clans to the Edina archipelago.

There was a will to help me, but they also couldn't leave their clans in the chaos of the continent due to the Gate Incident.

The clan of the Vampire Lords now played a crucial role in my military power.

Vampires were mostly mages, and the sunlight-tolerant Vampire Lords were vital pillars supporting my rule throughout the archipelago.

Magic.

Without this crucial power, I wouldn't have been able to provide shelter for the many refugees, build new buildings, or grow food as quickly.

Humans generally fear vampires.

But when they see vampires using magic to farm, grow crops, and work hard to feed them, humans become perplexed.

Humans provide blood as long as they don't turn into vampires, and vampires provide food for humans.

It's a somewhat gruesome symbiotic relationship, but what can you do? It's like having a throat full of grape juice.

So, the clans of the Friday, Thursday, and Saturday seemed to have no complaints about this situation.

The vampires, my most important supporters and collaborators, were watching me.

“Your Majesty, it seems that rumors about this place are slowly spreading across the continent.”

Eleris spoke.

Eleris mostly worked alone.

She wandered the continent, destroying Warp Gates wherever possible, doing what she could to completely end the Gate Incident.

“Rumors?”

“Yes, I can't be sure of the source, but whispers about a paradise in the south are spreading.”

The continent was in chaos.

The Empire, preoccupied with doing their best, had not yet discovered that I had established myself in the far south.

Even if they knew, they wouldn't have the resources to do anything right now.

“For now, there are only rumors about somewhere in the south, and no one knows the specifics… But in the long term, powerful forces like the Empire may reach Port Mokna while searching the southern regions.”

“…That's true.”

Our continental base, Port Mokna.

It's just a tiny dot on a continental map, but if the Empire learns that it's safe and housing a large military force, the problem could escalate.

If someone from Port Mokna were captured, the Empire would become aware that the Demon King had settled in the far southern archipelago.

The Edina archipelago won't remain hidden from the Empire's gaze forever.

The Gate Incident destroyed much of humanity's foundation, but it will eventually end.

Eleris's report concluded.

“The installation of sewage systems in the refugee settlements is nearly complete. The development of large-scale farmland in the south is almost done, and we only need to plant seeds now. Also, we've begun constructing ships to transport supplies to other areas.”

I nodded at Luvien's words.

The Lord of Thursday.

Although I'm not certain how closely related it is, the vampires of Thursday were well-versed in magic involving living beings, including alchemy.

I never thought they would use it for agriculture.

One of my significant advantages is being able to employ a considerable number of top-tier mages for material production and farming.

The Empire cannot adopt this approach.

Their territory to defend is simply too vast, and they never know when monsters from the gates might roam the continent and attack their cities.

Since my land is safe from the gate crisis, I can pour all my resources into supporting the people.

"Excavation is underway at an abandoned magic stone mine near Port Mokna. Although mining is possible, transportation is expected to be difficult. It would be great if Demon King could lead a squad to assist with transport."

"Yes, let's do that."

Magic stones.

A resource that is absolutely scarce at this point in time.

From streetlights to everyday magical tools, there wasn't a single item without magic stones.

Edina Archipelago couldn't produce magic stones on its own.

Simply having lanterns to light up the night would greatly reduce the crime rate in the refugee residential areas. That's why Gallarush had secured numerous dormant mines and quarries to supply magic stones to the Edina Archipelago.

If enough magic stones are secured, the quality of life can be dramatically improved.

In the current situation of the rapidly growing population of the Edina Archipelago, it's no exaggeration to say that magic stones are needed indefinitely.

Eleris, Luvien, and Gallarush finished speaking.

Lastly, Antirianus looked at me.

"Your Greatness, it appears that the Empire has successfully destroyed about 80% of the existing warp gates."

"Is that so?"

Antirianus is in charge of intelligence gathering.

While I try to rescue as many civilians as possible here and have often gone directly to deal with the southern continent's monsters and gates, the key force to end this crisis is ultimately the Empire.

I was already aware that the troops led by Saviolin Turner were focused solely on destroying the warp gates in numerous cities.

Eighty percent.

Once all the warp gates are destroyed, the gate crisis will end.

However, there's still the long and arduous task of dealing with all the monsters that have already entered our world.

And it's only going to get more difficult.

As the number of warp gates decreases, more powerful monsters will pour out from the remaining gates.

The approaching end of the gate crisis means that each remaining gate is becoming increasingly dangerous.

"Additionally, the Empire has successfully reclaimed all directly governed territories, including thirty major cities, and has secured its defensive posture. From now on, it seems likely to assist other surviving nations and reclaim territories. It would be fair to say that the Empire has fully restored its national functions."

Although the Edina Archipelago is relatively safe, the Empire has reclaimed its territories taken by monsters on the riotous continent and fully restored its national functions.

The power of humans struck me anew.

I wasn't sure if it was good news for me, but Antirianus smiled faintly.

"However, the population concentrated in the Imperial Capital has exceeded forty million. Large-scale refugee camps have formed on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital, and the Empire is currently unable to cope with the scale. The streets of the refugee camps are filled with waste and corpses of starved refugees, resulting in a state of lawlessness."

It was natural for people to flock to the Imperial Capital, as it had been in the original work.

As a result, vast lawless zones were formed.

The population within the Imperial Domain alone is incomparably greater than the total population of the Edina Archipelago.

The empire cannot support, control, or guarantee the safety and livelihood of all these people.

Monsters frequently roam the continent, posing a constant threat of attack.

Although the Gate crisis is gradually being resolved, the empire still faces other pressing issues.

Antirianus continues to speak.

"Moreover, as distrust toward the Five Great Religious Orders has reached its peak, the majority of refugees have come to believe in the Hero Religion, which positions the hero Ellen Artorius as their prophet."

The coerced hero.

As it is revealed that I am the Demon King and the root of this crisis, Ellen is forcibly made the prophet of the Hero Religion.

Antirianus laughs.

It's as if he finds the situation amusing, where I, the one orchestrating all this for the sake of humanity, have become the object of hatred for the vast majority of humans.

"The majority of refugees, and a significant number of existing Imperial Domain residents, are believed to follow the Hero Religions, and their dissatisfaction is mounting."

"Dissatisfaction?"

What kind of dissatisfaction would they have if they believe that Ellen will kill me, as per the Hero Religion's doctrine? Is it dissatisfaction that Ellen hasn't killed me yet? Ellen doesn't even know where I am.

"The followers of the Hero Religion wish to make the princess, who they believe to be the Demon King's collaborator, a sacrificial lamb."

"…"

Ah, so that's the issue.

—---

I had already heard about Charlotte. Rumors had spread about the strange power she possessed.

In reality, I wasn't colluding with Charlotte, but people's hatred towards me has reached a breaking point, and I am still not on the continent.

People desire a sacrificial lamb that they can present before themselves.

As a result, Charlotte, who had been abducted to the Demon King's castle and had been close to me, was considered the prime collaborator with the Demon King.

It's quite ironic.

Ellen is portrayed as a pitiful hero who has been deceived by the Demon King all this time.

Charlotte is considered a collaborator who worked with the Demon King.

Antirianus continues to laugh.

Although he has always cooperated with me, at this moment, I truly want to punch that smirking face.

A crazy loyalist who finds happiness in his lord's misfortune.

Antirianus says,

"The imperial family has consistently been unresponsive to the demands of the masses, but this attitude may eventually breed distrust towards the imperial family. They might think that the imperial family is also colluding with the Demon King, hence why they're not handing over Charlotte de Gardias. That's the kind of talk going around."

“…That would be the case."

People believe what they want to believe.

Why isn't the princess being executed?

Aren't you all in this together?

The discussion about why the princess must die has already concluded. They just want to believe that she is the Demon King's collaborator, so they believe it without question.

Therefore, they will inevitably come to hate everyone trying to protect such a princess.

Demands from the Hero Religion and the general public to execute the princess continue throughout the Imperial Domain and the continent. If the empire remains unresponsive, riots will eventually break out.

Executing the princess won't solve anything.

However, people are simply angry.

They are furious, aggrieved, and saddened.

They just want someone to bear their anger and die.

It's not the Demon King, whose whereabouts are unknown, but the princess within their reach.

"Emperor Bertus must eventually present the princess before the masses."

Bertus, who has become the emperor.

The Emperor must protect the empire.

The fate of the empire and Charlotte's life cannot be exchanged, nor should they be.

Regardless of my will, the Gate Incident has already occurred.

No matter what Bertus wants, Charlotte will eventually have to face the stake.

The princess's life must be traded for the citizens' anger.

"O great being, what will you do?"

Antirianus laughed heartily.

Charlotte cursed me.

She said I should die the most miserable death in the world.

There's no particular grudge. The misunderstandings I've built up with Charlotte are enough to warrant such words.

Does Charlotte still hate me?

I cannot know.

Once when escaping from the Demon King's Castle.

And once in the Spring Palace.

I have saved Charlotte's life twice.

So, whether Charlotte still hates me or not, I'll do it a third time regardless of her will.

I swore I would do so.

I will overcome any night, any hatred, and all malice.

I will save Charlotte.

"I need to check the situation."

Whenever that may be, I will do so.

—---

Teleport is high-level magic, and Mass Teleport is an even higher-level magic.

Only the Vampire Lords, including Eleris, can support such a level of magical power.

Harriet could cast the highest-level magic with the help of power cartridges, but due to the circumstances, she couldn't secure enough cartridges and didn't use them.

Therefore, only a very few people can immediately return to Edina Archipelago from

the continent or be deployed to the continent through Mass Teleport.

For example, only someone like Liana de Grantz, who teleported to the Royal Central Training Ground with Eleris, could travel by teleport at this level, as it is extremely limited.

The elder Vampire Lords of the Council are not always present here, as they all have their duties.

Liana, dressed in a simple outfit, looked at me and nodded her head.

"Did you get some sleep?"

"I didn't."

Liana, now better known by her nickname, Thunder King, was both the shield protecting Port Mokna and the strongest spear saving people chased by monsters.

"Ugh, I'm hungry. Let's talk while eating something."

"Alright."

Although we have a trivial conversation, Liana has killed the most monsters among us and saved the most people.

Harriet, Liana, and I sat in the royal dining hall, sharing our stories.

The king's meal is not particularly extravagant, but it is not too meager either.

Comparatively, the meals provided at the temple were incomparable in both quality and quantity.

"There are no monsters or people left around Mokna. We need to go incredibly far to even see a monster's tail. There's nothing more we can do there."

Searching for people hiding or fleeing from monsters near the fixed base has now become an unrewarding situation.

That's why, although a large number of refugees were initially brought on ships, today, there were only 800 refugees.

"There's another port city about 170 kilometers west of Mokna. It might be better to secure that place and use it as a base for search and rescue operations."

"Let's look into it."

We should establish another base and turn it into a forward base to carry out rescue operations and monster relief efforts. Liana asks while chewing on a sausage.

"Then, the crucial decision is whether to abandon or maintain Mokna. What do you think?"

"Hmm… If we operate two forward bases, the chances of being detected by the empire double. It seems a bit unnecessary to maintain Mokna, which has lost its usefulness."

"But it would be a waste to abandon all the supplies and infrastructure there."

"That's true."

I was convinced of the need to establish a new forward base, so the discussion of whether to abandon Mokna was postponed.

"Anyway… Will you be alright? Are you really going to the empire?"

This time, it was Harriet who asked me.

"The empire? What are you talking about all of a sudden?"

Liana tilted her head, not knowing what I was planning to do.

"Recently… There seems to be a strong public opinion to execute the princess in the empire. So, he's going to go there personally to investigate their movements."

"…?"

At my words, Liana tilted her head.

"Wow… I usually think of you as a pushover, but… Isn't this going too far? Not only caring for humans but also taking care of the imperial princess, who is our enemy?"

Liana was the one who most wanted the empire to collapse and the Gardias Royal Family to be destroyed among us.

Liana wasn't even particularly close to Charlotte in reality.

So, it was natural for her to get angry at my words about going to the empire to investigate because I was worried about the princess of the enemy nation.

Well…

Is this the act of a pushover?

I don't know.

"Hey, I've been doing a job that doesn't suit me for two years now. You know?"

"Being a king?"

"Yeah, I hate sitting around all day listening to people's requests. It drives me crazy."

"You've done pretty well so far, considering that. And what will you do if being a king doesn't suit you as a demon lord?"

"I've been doing it reluctantly, it never suited me. Of course, neither does this, but it's a bit better to go out to the continent and kill monsters. Sometimes, when someone comes all the way to the royal palace asking for punishment because their neighbor broke their dishes, I want to lash out at them regardless of right or wrong."

"Ah, you're talking about that time…"

Harriet knew what I was talking about since she had been with me at that time.

There were more than one or two people who came to me with trivial matters, asking me to solve them.

It even makes me feel terrified that the past when I died from high blood pressure would be repeated.

At my words, Liana looked at me with a slightly puzzled expression.

"Ah… You're under a lot of stress, huh?"

"It's not something I should say to you who's on the front lines, but I'm fed up with this. I can't do it anymore."

I've been doing this for two years.

It's an area that doesn't suit my aptitude and has no talent. I did it because I had to, not because I enjoyed it.

And as I do it, my mental state keeps deteriorating.

Harriet can help with political affairs for a while. And she'll surely do better than me. However, I can't hand it over to her since she'll have to do it for the rest of her life.

And Harriet had many responsibilities as a magic expert, not just as a secretary.

So, we need someone who can sit there for the rest of their life.

I'll appoint someone with more talent and efficiency than me to be the king for the rest of their life.

"I don't know how, but if I get a chance, I'll have to bring Charlotte. I'll make her the king instead of me."

At this point, it's not that I'm saving Charlotte.

Charlotte is the one saving me.

I have saved her life three times already.

Isn't it time for me to receive some compensation?

CHAPTER 460

That night.

In the royal bedroom of Edina Castle.

I sat on the bed, watching Harriet dry her hair.

Harriet was no longer wearing the clothes she had on just moments ago, but had changed into her nightgown.

"You should sleep soon. We have a lot to do tomorrow. You said we're going to the empire, right?"

“…I suppose so."

It wasn't for any other reason, but Harriet and I had been sharing a bedroom for about six months now.

There were two beds in the Demon King's bedroom. One was for me, and the other, slightly apart from mine, was used by Harriet.

The reason we suddenly started sharing a bedroom was a single one.

The threat of assassination.

The actions of those who hated me had become more apparent.

It didn't happen too frequently, but when I least expected it, they would persistently attempt it in different ways.

Sometimes it was poisoning, other times a midnight attack.

There were many instances when people within the castle were collaborators.

It wasn't that they were bribed.

Sometimes, people who hated me normally just cooperated with the assassination plot.

Harriet and Olivia had once saved my life by forcing me to vomit after I had nearly died from ingesting a potent poison.

Originally researching new magic and magic artifacts, Harriet took on the role of a scribe and never left my side.

Since then, Harriet started to check all the food and drink I consumed for poison, and I even acquired a talent for poison resistance using achievement points.

I could handle physical attacks thanks to the warnings from my intuition, but only those who have experienced it know the creepiness of seeing a familiar face pointing a dagger at my throat while I was asleep.

Countless people hated me.

Even the people of Edina Archipelago, whom I saved, hated me because they knew that the root cause of all these problems was the Demon King.

Even after I replaced all the castle servants who were lost in the Gate incident with those who had no connections, such incidents continued to happen.

All humans to some extent hated me, but I couldn't fill the castle's entire workforce with demons who would obey me absolutely. Discrimination and the subjugation of humanity would only provoke even greater backlash.

Not only me, but Harriet also suffered from these attacks.

Since I didn't die, they tried to kill the people around me.

Was that all there was?

There was also a time when I woke up to find Antirianus had tied me up and was snickering at me outside the palace.

He asked what I thought would have happened if it had been a magician from the empire or the Black Order instead of him.

Although it was one of Antirianus' wicked pranks, the memory of that day still sent shivers down my spine.

It was only because the empire and the Black Order didn't know my whereabouts that I was safe. I realized that a magician of Antirianus' caliber could take my life at any moment.

The defenses were not entirely lacking, but they could be breached at any time.

So, ever since then, Harriet and I have been sharing a bedroom, and before falling asleep, we made it a habit to seal the room with numerous magical devices and barriers.

At first, both Harriet and I felt strange and restless, but eventually, time healed us and we became accustomed to these things.

There was no helping the rumor that the Demon King slept in the same bedroom with the scribe every day.

Surprisingly, Olivia didn't get angry about it.

Knowing how much I suffered from assassination attempts, she was more concerned about me.

Anyway.

In truth, my relationship with Harriet had become practically like a marriage, but there was nothing to be done about it.

Well…

Now, I wonder if there is really any difference between that and how I feel now.

In some aspects, Harriet was better at handling situations than the elder mages of the Council.

In most crises, I would handle the physical aspects, and Harriet would handle the magical ones. Consequently, Harriet and I spent most of our time together to protect each other due to our complementary skills.

After drying her hair, Harriet sat down on her bed and placed a scroll book on the bedside table.

"I've added teleport scrolls. There are more than twenty, so you can use them anytime you need to."

"Alright."

"Should I come with you?"

Harriet, with her hair untied, stared at me intently.

"No, I don't think it will be a pleasant sight. I'll go alone. There shouldn't be any danger."

Since I would be disguised using the ring of Sarkegaar, there was no risk of my identity being discovered.

It's not like I was unaware of the situation, and the scene I would see in the empire wouldn't be pleasant for anyone. I planned to go alone, quietly, and return just as quietly.

I lay down on the bed, and Harriet leaned against it, opening a book between her knees and beginning to read the middle pages.

A dim, yellow magic light illuminated the book Harriet was reading.

"Do you ever sleep, or do you just watch me sleep?"

"I sleep enough."

As if to say, "don't worry about me, just sleep," Harriet gestured to me without even looking up.

I was busy, but Harriet was undoubtedly tired as well, having to coordinate my tasks and ensure the safety of our bedroom.

Frankly, I could feel it.

At some point, Harriet's magical achievements had stagnated.

Though Harriet conducted research whenever time allowed, the overly limited time meant she couldn't make much progress.

In truth, Harriet was better suited to be a researcher.

However, there were no people I could trust, and her abilities were so exceptional that she took on the roles of my secretary and bodyguard.

She had so much to do that she couldn't find time for what she truly wanted.

So, during the short time before sleep, when all she had to do was watch over me, Harriet would steal moments to read.

I thought Harriet would have liked Akasha.

But Akasha had disappeared.

Thus, the magical achievements that had long accumulated in Akasha had all transformed into the emptiness of another dimension.

How much magic had there been in Akasha?

Now it was impossible to know.

I could hear the sound of pages carefully being turned, so as not to disturb my sleep.

I looked at Harriet's face as she read the book.

"Blockhead."

"Hmm."

Now she didn't even look at me when I called her that.

In reality, because of her position as a scribe, I wouldn't call her that outside.

Only when we were alone like this could I use that nickname from the old days.

Maybe that's why Harriet didn't get angry.

She knew that it was only in these moments that I could call her that.

"Thank you."

At my sudden words, Harriet looked at me with a gentle smile.

"Me too."

What exactly was she grateful for?

I always took, and it seemed like I had never given anything in return.

I couldn't understand it.

Harriet returned her gaze to the book, and I closed my eyes.

—---

Whoosh!

In an instant, dozens of people appeared in the middle of the square through a warp point.

As warp gates were currently unusable, long-distance travel now relied on the manual transportation of troops by mages capable of using mass teleportation.

Given the situation in the Edina Archipelago, it was only natural that those who could move through mass teleportation were an elite few.

And now, Ellen and her direct subordinates, led by Ellen, had appeared through the warp point.

Ellen had just completed her mission report in the Imperial Capital and was scheduled to be deployed to the next location.

"Oh…"

"It's the hero…"

Ellen Artorius had become a celebrity in her own right, with a level of fame that

could hardly be described as mere celebrity.

In terms of the crowd's trust, Ellen received more support than even the emperor in the current state of the empire.

Thus, it was only natural that people flocked to her like a cloud.

"Hero! Our savior!"

"Hero, where are you going this time?"

"Hero… thank you for saving us!"

Ellen had saved countless people.

"Hero! You're amazing!"

"Hero!"

"Hero, please watch over us…"

"Why doesn't my sister come to the Imperial Capital more often?"

Ellen was no longer a stranger to these scenes, having become too accustomed to them.

However, she was afraid of people projecting hope onto her when they were filled with despair and pain.

For she was the root cause of all these problems.

People trusted her.

They blamed everything on the Demon King and loved her.

There was no need for her to run around saving people like this.

If she had believed in Reinhardt back then, none of this would have happened.

She hadn't saved people.

Everyone living in this abyss of despair, unable to wear proper clothes, looking no better than beggars, was all because of her.

"I love you, Hero!"

Ellen was afraid of the sight of so many people finding hope in her.

It's all my fault.

It's my mistake.

Don't like me, don't love me, hate me.

The one who should be hated is not the Demon King, but me.

Ellen was occasionally seized by the urge to say such things.

But she couldn't deliberately plunge those who found hope in her into despair.

For those who endure this miserable life by hating the Demon King and believing in the hero.

She couldn't force the victims to swallow the despair of the truth.

People sought salvation from Ellen.

That's why the boiling crowd in the Imperial Capital didn't turn into a mob.

If Ellen were to say that all this was her fault, people wouldn't believe her at first, but even if they did, it would be a problem.

The moment the crowd learns that this situation arose due to the hero's and the empire's mistakes, the empire would collapse.

Without the empire, there would be no humanity.

"Will you kill the Demon King for us?"

"Ah…"

A young girl clung to Ellen's arm and asked.

The Demon King.

The eyes of those who believed that killing the Demon King would bring peace to the world.

From the longing eyes of a child to the hateful gazes of the elderly.

The hope of humanity.

As their representative, Ellen feared the day she would be forced to stand before Reinhardt.

Central Palace Tetra.

"The Kernstadt capital, Kiel, is not a problem. What's important is deciding which satellite city to restore first."

"Yes."

After reporting to Bertus, Ellen discussed the next course of action. She quietly observed the tired expression on Bertus's face.

Even the powerful forces of the strongest Vassal Kingdoms had only succeeded in defending a few cities, including the capital. After reclaiming all the Directly Administered Territories, the Empire now had to decide which of the Vassal Kingdoms to fully support.

It was now time to begin the restoration work of Kernstadt, which could be called the First Vassal Kingdom.

All the Warp Gates within Kernstadt territory had been destroyed.

Thus, all that was left to do was to eliminate the monsters hiding throughout the city.

However, easier said than done, as countless soldiers, knights, and magicians would die in the process.

Human resources were being exhausted while the Empire was being restored.

"What do you think?"

"Rather than reclaiming each city one by one, I think it would be best to start by clearing the surrounding areas of the cities we've successfully defended. There are likely very few survivors in the fallen cities anyway. We can take care of that work gradually."

“…True, that makes sense."

Bertus was deep in thought, with his arms crossed.

"How is Charlotte?"

At Ellen's question, Bertus clicked his tongue.

“…No change."

Ellen was a hero of the Empire.

As such, she had grown tired of hearing the tiresome tales of killing the Demon King, just as she had grown tired of the misunderstandings about the princess.

They said the princess was cursed.

Be careful around the princess because the hero might be harmed.

Ellen, who was often away from the royal palace, would visit Charlotte whenever she returned. After all, Ellen was the princess's guardian knight.

However, Ellen couldn't open Charlotte's closed lips, just as Bertus couldn't.

Even though she didn't speak, Charlotte would shed tears when she saw Ellen.

Both Ellen and Charlotte blamed themselves.

Every time they saw each other, they couldn't help but feel the weight of all that had transpired because they hadn't trusted Reinhardt.

Just as Ellen saw everything as her fault, so did Charlotte.

Even without being able to talk, Ellen couldn't help but understand Charlotte's heart every time she saw her weeping.

In the end, the majority of the populace now wished for the princess's death.

"Anything else needed at the scene?"

"As always, we need power cartridges."

"I'm not sure when we'll have a mass production system in place…"

Power Cartridges and Moonshine.

Just as Reinhardt had intended when he created them in preparation for the Gate Incident, power cartridges had now become vital supplies on the battlefield.

Magicians who used magic power from the power cartridges displayed tremendous power on the battlefield.

Those who ingested Moonshine specialized in close combat and rapidly improved their skills. In fact, the number of people awakening to Magic Body Strengthening had grown exponentially.

It was due to this strange phenomenon of the dying military force being compensated by the strengthening of the existing military force.

It was said that they had been created to strengthen the Demon King's army.

The items Bertus had thought to be for that purpose had now become indispensable.

Only after everything had happened did Bertus realize that the choice he should have never made was the only correct answer.

He should have released the Demon King.

Even though he knew regret was useless, Bertus was tormented by it.

Everyone blamed themselves in this situation.

Charlotte for herself.

Ellen for herself.

And Bertus as well.

They all thought they were responsible.

"Was there anything special to talk about?"

"…"

Ellen was silent for a moment, then something came to her mind.

"I heard there's a paradise to the south."

"Paradise?"

"Yeah, it seems like some strange… belief is spreading."

"…Right. People must want to believe in such stories."

In times of overwhelming despair, all manner of nonsense is created.

That's why Bertus had no choice but to dismiss that rumor as mere idle gossip.

CHAPTER 461

Ellen could not stay long at the imperial palace.

She had to be redeployed immediately after completing her mission. This was due both to the situation of the empire and to Ellen's own will.

After briefly conversing with Bertus, Ellen headed to the Spring Palace as she always did.

Ordinary people could not even approach the Spring Palace. Of course, Ellen was not bound by such constraints.

Upon arriving at the Spring Palace, specifically Charlotte's bedroom, Ellen saw the exact same scene Bertus had witnessed before.

The princess, sitting on her bed, hugging her knees and staring blankly out the window.

Charlotte de Gardias, in the form of a demon.

Fused with the soul of the Demon King, it was because of this soul that she had become this way. Despite almost severing her connection to evil, Charlotte had become weaker but did not die.

"Charlotte."

"…"

At Ellen's gentle call, Charlotte slowly turned her head and stared at Ellen.

Her red eyes with vertically slit pupils.

Those eyes would give anyone an eerie feeling, but Ellen could only read sadness and regret in them.

Charlotte buried her face between her knees.

Tears that could hardly fall due to her emaciated state dampened the camisole she was wearing. Ellen watched silently.

Even though they knew regret would not change anything, they could not help but feel it.

If only they had trusted Reinhardt.

That single phrase was the cause of countless tragedies that unfolded upon humanity, a series of brutal events.

Reinhardt had disappeared, and humanity faced ruin.

That's why whenever they met like this, they could not help but reaffirm each other's guilt.

Ellen could still do something, like saving people.

But for Charlotte, who could not even show her face to the masses, there was nothing she could do other than remain confined in the Spring Palace.

Ellen slowly approached Charlotte and sat by her bed.

Then, she carefully embraced the frail Charlotte.

"Soon, we'll be able to destroy all the warp gates on the continent."

"…"

"And once we slowly eliminate all the monsters on the continent, this situation will end."

"…"

Ellen spoke softly, hoping that somehow Charlotte could lessen her guilt, even though she could not comfort herself.

"Then the people who lost their homes will be able to find them again."

The dead cannot return.

"Everyone will find their own territories… and live like they used to."

Lost homelands cannot be restored.

"It'll take time, but little by little… everything will return to the way it was, just like before."

Broken relationships cannot be mended forever.

"So let's hang in there a little longer. Just a little more… a little more…"

As she spoke, Ellen could not help but bite her lip, remembering the many things her words were ignoring.

Bitter blood seeped through her torn lips.

"…"

"…"

"Can we…"

Ellen's voice trembled in the end.

"Ever be forgiven…?"

By Reinhardt.

By the whole world.

Knowing that they wanted to be forgiven but couldn't be.

Charlotte cried.

And Ellen, she couldn't even cry.

—---

Every time Ellen faced Charlotte, she could only feel a sense of misery.

Although they were not originally on good terms, after the situation had come to this, Ellen and Charlotte had gone beyond the relationship of a knight and her lord, and had become bound by a strange bond of shared guilt.

A relationship tied together by sorrow and guilt.

They projected the same emotions onto each other.

And so, Ellen could not turn her back on Charlotte. Even though she knew that she could not improve Charlotte's condition, even though she knew she would receive no response, Ellen visited the Spring Palace after returning to the imperial city following the grueling days of battle.

"The situation is improving."

She always said that.

Technically, it wasn't a lie.

One could only say the situation had improved from the worst to slightly less terrible.

"Today, we saved a few people," she said.

That wasn't a lie either.

She simply didn't mention how many had died.

She also said that they had driven the monsters out of the ruined city.

That wasn't a lie either.

She just didn't mention that not a single living person was left in the ruins.

She didn't lie, but she didn't tell the miserable truth.

Even though she knew Charlotte could read between the lines.

With Charlotte, who had not changed at all, behind her, Ellen left the Spring Palace and the imperial palace.

From the hill at the entrance to the imperial palace, Ellen could see the temple beyond the Imperial Capital.

The temple, which had been in shambles due to the meteor, had already been restored.

The cradle of talent that once gathered the world's best talents had now transformed into a military base, training warriors.

With the connections between continents severed, the temple was now conscripting and training those who showed even a hint of talent in combat from among the refugees.

The temple, which once carefully selected and charged a hefty tuition fee, now provided weapons to those who wanted to fight, taught them how to battle, and then deployed them to the field.

No matter how many talented individuals they had, most of them were sent to the battlefield as soldiers without even awakening their Magic Body Strengthening and died in countless numbers.

Although the original students of the temple, selected through careful screening, were making a difference in battle, the majority of the new conscripts were merely amateurs driven by vengeance.

Even such amateurs were necessary given the current state of the empire.

Ellen knew that there were countless people who volunteered as combatants, idolizing the hero who had saved them, only to die like mayflies.

The temple, once a cradle for talent, now raised moths drawn to the flame.

Among the Royal Class, fortunately, none of Ellen's classmates had died yet.

It was horrifying to express it as fortunate.

And the fact that she had to use the term "yet" felt eerie to Ellen.

It was nighttime.

There was still some time left before she had to set out for the next operation.

Afraid of being recognized, Ellen pulled up her hood.

Ellen was now not only tired of her fame but also scared of it.

As she walked quietly down the streets of the Imperial City, Ellen felt someone's presence behind her.

There were many people around, but it felt like someone was watching her.

That kind of presence.

When she turned her head, no one was there.

"...?"

She was sure something had been watching her.

Feeling a strange sensation, Ellen continued to walk down the street.

—---

I hadn't expected to see Ellen while waiting.

I was sure she would be as busy as I was, with hardly any time to spare.

However, as soon as I arrived in the imperial city, I heard people on the street talking about the hero returning.

Ellen was in the imperial city.

Just in case, I stood idly near the entrance of the Imperial Palace.

I waited for quite a while.

That's why I was able to see her.

Though she was wearing her hood, I could see her face.

I saw Ellen, her expression colder and more detached than before. And there was an unmistakable weariness etched on her face.

Perhaps I should have tried talking to her.

If I had, maybe we could have had a surprisingly ordinary conversation.

But a considerable amount of time had passed.

I didn't know what Ellen was thinking.

Ellen had played a decisive role in my escape, but now I couldn't tell what was on her mind.

She might resent me, or perhaps she felt sorry for me.

It wasn't a time when we could exchange pleasantries, but I wondered if we could share some sort of conversation.

I wanted to reach out and talk to her.

But this Ellen was not the Ellen from my days as a student at the Royal Class of Temple.

Ellen Artorius.

The hope of humanity and the one to confront the Demon King.

Just as Ellen could no longer be a Royal Class student, I was no longer Reinhardt, a Royal Class student myself.

Divided by the duality of hero and demon king.

We were not meant to meet.

Sharing conversations, things we shouldn't do.

I didn't know when our impending fate would unfold before me, but talking would only bring us more pain.

So I was content to watch from afar.

No.

I was not content.

After not seeing her for two years.

I couldn't be satisfied with just that.

I wanted to watch her more.

But since I couldn't, seeing that she wasn't doing well but was still somehow getting by was enough.

I walked along the Imperial City.

Death, decay, and suffering were all that could be read on the faces of the people.

Even the residents of the Imperial Capital hadn't escaped unscathed from the gate incident.

Most of them had lost their parents, siblings, children, or other family members.

Despairing, yet determined to survive, people were heading somewhere.

Amid those faces of despair, there were certainly those who wore hopeful expressions.

“The hero has returned!”

“It seems she's slain a great number of monsters this time.”

“She'll defeat the Demon King eventually, right?”

I could read hope in the faces of those discussing Ellen.

Hatred and anger towards the Demon King.

A being that transforms such negative emotions into hope.

The hero.

In this Imperial Capital, overflowing with depression, anger, and hatred, Ellen was a presence that brought a glimmer of hope to the people.

Swathed in fear and hatred, they continuously produced stories and rumors.

“The Demon King is gathering monsters from the gates in the Darklands…”

“The roaming monsters on the continent are nothing compared to the Demon King's main force…”

“Even though she's a hero…”

Among the crowds on the Imperial Capital, it seemed widely believed that I not only controlled the monsters from the gates but also had completed my reconstruction.

Darklands?

I never visited them after absorbing the forces of the Demon Clan during my tour.

“The hero has two sacred relics, but the Demon King also has two…”

“If the hero had fallen for the Demon King's ruse at the Temple… It's too terrifying to even imagine.”

“The hero revealed the Demon King's identity long ago. She knows everything. She's not someone who would fall for the Demon King's tricks.”

It was known that my infiltration of the Temple was an attempt to capture the hero, Ellen Artorius.

What a crowd.

They share their own imagined tales like snacks, and before they know it, they come to believe them.

The origin of the false truth had long vanished; no one knew who started to spread it.

I had become the ruler of the rebuilt Darklands, the strongest in history.

People freely imagined, feared, and hated as they pleased.

They said no such country existed.

Beyond your sight, far to the south across the sea, there was a nation in the Edina Archipelago, inhabited not by monsters of the Gate, but by humans and demons.

In retrospect, reality was harder to believe.

The Demon King living alongside humans.

If I were not the Demon King, but one of them, I would have yelled at the one spreading such nonsense to stop spouting rubbish.

First of all, the fact that I could control and command the monsters of the Gate was a common theme among various absurd claims.

They seemed to imagine that since I caused this situation, the Demon King must naturally be able to control the monsters of the Gate.

Why couldn't they imagine that if that were possible and I truly hated humanity, I would have invaded the empire long ago and wiped them all out?

If someone raised such an opinion, another baseless rumor would be created to refute it, rendering the truth always meaningless.

And the targets of these baseless rumors were not just me.

“Was the Emperor really being controlled by the Princess?”

“Yeah, otherwise there would be no reason to leave the Princess alone.”

“No matter how important the Princess is, it's suspicious that they don't expose her despite her being cursed by the Demon King.”

“If the Princess is fine, they should at least show her, but that never happens, right?”

It went as far as to say that the reason the Empire didn't execute Charlotte was

because the Emperor was being controlled by the Princess.

“Well, if that were really the case, the Hero wouldn't have stayed silent…”

“That's true, but…”

In the end, Ellen served as a brake on this issue.

People believed in the omnipotence and omniscience of the Demon King, but at the same time, they also believed in Ellen's omnipotence and omniscience as his counterpart.

If the Princess was truly corrupted, why would her guardian knight Ellen remain silent?

Thus, the atmosphere and talk of executing the Princess never reached an extreme, maintaining a precarious balance.

“Well, let's say the Princess is fine, but what about the three enemies?”

“Those damn traitors…”

Liana de Grantz.

Olivia Lanze.

Harriet de Saint Owan.

The three students who had sided with me and fled the temple together.

They were known as the three enemies in the human world, betrayers of mankind.

Perhaps, as humans, they were even more potent symbols of hatred than I was.

There were refugee camps in both the Edina Archipelago and the Empire.

However, the Edina Archipelago could indiscriminately expand its territory throughout, as there were no monsters to worry about.

The Empire could not do that.

They could not freely increase their residential areas, and even if they did, they could not protect them. They never knew when monsters roaming the continent would attack.

So, while the Empire didn't interfere with the expansion of refugee camps, people continued to pour in.

As I entered the vast refugee camp filled with hastily built shacks, I couldn't help but feel a strange sense of welcome.

When I first arrived in the Empire, I entered Eleris's shop, and a few days later, I saw a group of beggars under the Bronze Gate bell tower.

The beggars, sprawled about amidst the haphazardly built shacks, reeking of alcohol.

The Rotary Club.

The landscape of the past, where those now dead and gone had once lived, stretched out to the horizon.

As soon as he crossed the border of the capital's outskirts, he was met with an expansive land of poverty.

This was the reality of the glorious and magnificent capital of the Gladius Empire, Gradium.

The hastily built shacks not only lacked soundproofing and insulation, but they were also not built to any standard, allowing for the sight of people lying inside.

The smell of waste and the stench of decay were overwhelming, while flies and other insects swarmed so much they'd hit one's face.

Although the refugee camp in Edina couldn't be considered much better, it wasn't as dreadful as this.

Approaching smoke that seemed to indicate a group kitchen, he soon discovered it was something else entirely.

It was the smoke from burning corpses.

Could it be an outbreak of some infectious disease? The clergy should have measures against diseases, so the situation shouldn't be this dire.

Or perhaps they had simply starved to death.

Near the smoke from the burning corpses, scrawny children played, their faces gaunt.

The sight of the children laughing innocently, juxtaposed with the misery of those burning the bodies, felt strikingly contrasting.

It was something beyond hell.

It felt like watching a life that had been forcibly adapted to hell.

He resolved not to think about such things.

If only he wasn't there.

If only he wasn't involved.

He couldn't help but be overwhelmed by such thoughts.

"…”

The Imperial Capital was truly hellish.

CHAPTER 462

The situation in the city center was somewhat better, but the people living in the shantytown where the refugees resided were in such a state that one couldn't help but wonder if they could endure the winter.

The Empire could not abandon them either.

As rations were being distributed, one could see the guards giving out something to the long line of people.

Thump!

“I said I won't take it!”

“Grandfather… you might die like this…”

A noisy commotion came from somewhere in the shantytown.

“As if I would accept treatment from those filthy priests who serve the Demon King! Just let me die! Damn it! I'd rather die!”

In one of the shacks, a disheveled priest wearing a soiled white robe slowly stood up, his face etched with sorrow.

The Church of Tu’an and the Als Order.

People began to reject the gods who had chosen the Demon King.

Amidst the murmurs of the crowd, a priest of Tu’an walked away with a heavy heart, his head bowed in sadness.

There was no need to witness this scene.

The reality of the Empire was evident enough.

But I couldn't leave so easily.

It felt like my responsibility to take in all of these scenes. I had to, at least in this way.

Although I couldn't resolve the horrible things that had happened because of me by merely observing them, it felt like I had to do it.

I passed by endless landscapes of broken lives.

As I approached the outskirts, the situation became more dire.

Corpse-ridden alleyways, swarming with maggots and flies, were all too common.

The Empire lacked the capacity to support all these people.

Although they tried to save the people, if the saved ultimately died of starvation, there would be no point in saving them.

The outcome was either death by monsters or a slow demise from hunger.

Just as I had utilized mages in the Edina Archipelago to cultivate food, the Empire must have been doing something similar.

On top of that, the Empire expended manpower to protect its vast territories from monsters.

There were personnel not only supporting the existing vassal nations but also working to put an end to the Gate crisis.

While the Edina Archipelago had conditions that allowed all resources to be used for supporting the people, the Empire did not.

That's why people were dying so futilely in the places the Empire couldn't reach.

In such extremely desperate situations, people's faces bore neither anger nor hatred.

Shrouded in the shadow of death, they sat anywhere they could on the streets, too exhausted to resent the world, as they slowly withered away.

As I neared the edge of the refugee area…

Crash!

Grrrrroooowwwwlll!

Aaahhhhh!

It's a monster!

A monster was smashing and rampaging through the shacks.

It was a monster from a gate that had drifted in from somewhere.

There was no chance that guards would be present in this no man's land.

Even if there were, it was uncertain whether they could handle the situation.

A monster with the face of a wild boar and the body of a gorilla, standing about 4 meters tall.

It wasn't a particularly powerful creature, but if left alone, hundreds of people in the refugee camp would die.

Civilians couldn't handle even just one of these monsters.

In areas with a security vacuum, a single monster could drift in and cause hundreds of deaths.

There was no time to waste.

I activated the Magic Body Strengthening throughout my body and ran.

It was quite a distance, but covering this range with my strength was no big deal.

Thud!

-Boom! Crash!

“Run! Get away!”

People are mercilessly crushed and shattered as I rush to the center of the chaos.

"Ugh!"

-Wham!

As I throw my fist, the magic imbued within it is converted into destructive power.

-Crash!

With just one strike of my magic-infused fist, the monster's head explodes.

Although I still haven't reached the Master Class,

I've become incomparably stronger than before.

* * *

I may not have reached the Master Class, but that doesn't mean my power is insufficient.

Name: Valier

Age: 20

Race: Archdemon

Current stats: [Strength 26.4(A+)] [Agility 23(A)] [Dexterity 20.9(A-)] [Magic 41.9(SS)] [Endurance 25.8(A)]

Talents

[Superpower - Self-suggestion]

[Superpower - Word Magic]

[Mana Domination]

[Weapon Mastery]

[Anti-magic]

[Supernatural Resistance]

[Poison Resistance]

Traits

[Sacred Mind]

[Hero's Bloodline]

[Intuition]

Acquired Abilities

[Demon Control A]

[Self-suggestion S]

[Word Magic B]

[Magic Body Strengthening A]

Overall Ability Assessment - Demon King

Combat Level Assessment - S+

It feels like gaining experience; I earn achievement points every time I defeat a monster.

For two years, as Edina's tasks increased, the need for direct combat decreased, but in the beginning, I had to fight rEllentlessly without a moment's rest.

Those were days spent tearing through the flesh and blood of monsters.

I invested the piled-up achievement points in strengthening myself.

Personally, I wanted to raise my magic stats to the maximum, but after reaching the SS rank, it became impossible to invest in them.

I couldn't afford the overly expensive top-tier talents, but I was able to unlock a few new talents.

However, I had to focus on the King's duties, so after the initial intense battles, I spent more time sitting on the throne.

That's why I couldn't move on to the next stage.

Nevertheless, my basic physical abilities were extremely developed and my Magic Body Strengthening increased to an absurd level. So, my magic output was on par with any other Master.

Having not entered the next stage, I achieved an abnormal growth in which only my basic abilities were enhanced.

Thus, my output isn't just on par with other Masters, but even surpasses them. I only lack in finesse and versatility.

Looking at the magic stats alone, I'm now on the same level as Saviolin Turner.

Of course, I don't have the confidence to beat her in a fight.

-Wham!

The headless monster's body crumbled.

I was splattered with the monster's flesh and blood, but it slid off the magic barrier covering my body, keeping my clothes clean.

In just a short moment, the monster had killed about fifteen people.

It all happened in less than a minute since the monster appeared.

"Oh…"

"Wh-who is that…?"

The fleeing people stared blankly at me, who had neutralized the monster with a single blow.

After all, I'm disguised through Sarkegaar's ring.

No one would recognize me.

There's no need to explain anything or say anything at all.

As I was about to leave,

-Gurgle!

Foam-like blood bubbled from the dead monster's corpse, and something began to emerge.

Tentacles.

Sharp, dagger-like tentacles hidden within the corpse targeted me and shot out.

"!"

-Clang!

I summoned Alsbringer and deflected the tentacles.

The impact felt excessively fierce for the sound of flesh and sword colliding.

No matter how formidable my Magic Body Strengthening defense is, monsters are unpredictable.

I thought it was dead, but tentacles suddenly burst forth from the corpse.

-Whoosh!

I incinerated the monster's body and the writhing tentacles that were flung away with the flames of my fire magic.

"…"

People stare at me.

“That is…”

“That black…”

Their gazes are fixated on my sword.

Recognizing a sacred weapon is a basic skill for those in the upper echelon.

However, the two sacred weapons possessed by the Demon King, Alsbringer and Tiamata, have become as famous as Lament and Lapelt, held by Ellen.

And so, the people recognize them.

"Th-the…… Demon King……."

One trembling person, lying on the ground, points at me.

"It's the Demon King's emblem!"

The Demon King's emblem.

That became the new nickname attached to Alsbringer and Tiamata.

Gradually, people began to flee in terror.

“The Demon King has appeared!”

It wasn't something I hoped someone would recognize.

I had already learned enough about Imperial Capital.

I took out a scroll book and unfolded a teleport scroll.

I silently watched the terrified, fleeing people until the light of the teleport swallowed me.

—---

"What do you mean the Demon King appeared?"

Ellen, having heard strange rumors right before leaving the Imperial Capital, rushed straight into the Imperial Palace.

Demon King.

Upon hearing those words, Ellen felt as if her mind had gone completely blank.

She couldn't bear it without knowing what had happened.

So, even for Ellen, she had no choice but to commit the impoliteness of suddenly visiting the Emperor.

Although it was time for sleep, Bertus was in his office.

Bertus was propping up his chin with his right hand, deep in thought.

"It's not the first time nonsense has sprung up from the refugee area……."

Upon hearing that, Ellen felt her strangely heated heart cool down.

False rumors.

It was common for people to see hallucinations in the midst of fear and panic.

Annoyed by being swayed by such stories, Ellen felt a crack forming in her already dark mood.

"Strictly speaking, it seems like they saw Alsbringer, not the Demon King. From the description of its appearance, it's definitely Alsbringer… which means it must be Reinhardt."

Hearing those words, Ellen's lips trembled.

If they saw Alsbringer, then it must have been the Demon King, as there could be no other owner.

"They're saying strange things. That the Demon King brought monsters, killed refugees, and disappeared……."

The story had changed in a short time. Ellen shook her head vigorously.

"There's no way……."

"Of course. I don't know why he came, but a monster appeared on the outskirts, and Reinhardt killed it and disappeared somewhere. But who would believe that the Demon King saved the people?"

The Demon King killed the monster that was attacking the refugees and then vanished.

However, those who witnessed the Demon King killing the monster directly only saw that, while those who didn't only heard that the monster had been killing refugees when the Demon King appeared.

The truth that the Demon King had killed the monster attacking the refugees and then disappeared was buried beneath the rapidly spreading rumors.

The Demon King saved the people.

There was no reason for the Demon King to do so, and the people refused to believe the truth.

So, it was only natural for the plausible lie to take the place of the truth.

"Damn it, so this is how Reinhardt must have felt…"

"…"

Ellen and Bertus were experiencing the same frustration that Reinhardt must have felt in real-time.

There was no reason for Reinhardt to do such a thing.

If he was truly planning to raid the refugee outskirts, it wouldn't make sense to bring only one monster.

People choose to believe what they want to in the midst of terror.

They wouldn't believe that if Reinhardt had launched a proper attack, a whole refugee area would have turned into a sea of flames.

They couldn't believe it, so they didn't.

Truth doesn't resonate with a crowd driven mad by fear and hatred.

How could they believe in the Demon King?

Under such thoughts, Ellen and Bertus, who hadn't believed in Reinhardt, now found themselves in a position where they had to watch the lies spread among the crowd, replacing the truth they had learned.

"But then, why did Reinhardt even come here…?"

Ellen shared Bertus's curiosity.

At this time, the Demon King, who had disappeared from the Imperial Capital without any news, had reappeared on the Imperial Capital.

Ellen suddenly recalled the sensation she had felt a while ago, as if someone had been watching her.

That strange feeling she had thought was a mistake.

Could it be?

'…There's no way.'

At the thought that it might have been Reinhardt, Ellen was filled with self-loathing.

Despite not trusting Reinhardt.

Was she now indulging in the delusion that Reinhardt might still think of her?

To think that Reinhardt might have been watching her – she found the thought ridiculous and unworthy.

What reason would Reinhardt have to do so?

Although she didn't know where, Reinhardt had gone somewhere with those who believed in him.

There's no reason for him to seek her out again or keep an eye on her.

Two years had passed.

Amidst this miserable scene, Reinhardt must have long forgotten any feelings he had for her.

Reinhardt had done nothing wrong to Ellen.

The only one at fault was herself.

So, it was alright for Reinhardt to forget her. After all, she had betrayed him.

She couldn't forget Reinhardt. Because she had betrayed him.

That's why Ellen believes there is no possibility that Reinhardt remembers her or cherishes any memories, not even a little bit.

She doesn't think she has the right to hope for that.

"So why… did he come…?"

So why did he appear on the Imperial Capital, where he had never been before?

Neither Ellen nor Bertus could know the reason.

—---

Main port city of Edina Archipelago, Lazak, the Royal Capital.

When I returned, Harriet helped me out of my robe and carefully folded it in her hands.

"How was the Empire?"

“…I can't even joke about it being okay."

“…How bad was it?"

"The Imperial Capital's population capacity had long been exceeded. People were pouring in, and I had to worry about all of them starving to death. There was virtually no security in the outer districts. It's not even crime – if a monster horde mistakenly appeared, thousands of people could die within ten minutes."

At my words, Harriet sighed deeply.

"And a monster appeared in the outer district and I had to use Alsbringer. My

presence on the Imperial Capital has probably been spotted… Nothing major is likely to happen, but I can guess what kind of rumors will spread… I don't know what kind of impact this will have later on."

"Alsbringer?"

"Oh, there was a slightly dangerous situation."

"Well, it's a relief you didn't get hurt."

Harriet and I walked side by side down the royal palace corridor.

The Demon King had appeared in the Imperial Capital.

I hadn't done anything particularly extraordinary, but the mere fact that I had appeared was bound to have a significant impact on the Imperial Capital.

Now, the majority of the crowd knew that the Demon King could appear in the Imperial Capital at any time.

People might become more frightened and fall into a panic.

Perhaps I shouldn't have summoned Alsbringer, even if it was dangerous.

However, there are plenty of monsters capable of breaking through Magic Body Strengthening. Swordmasters don't die in vain, after all.

I don't know how my appearance in the Imperial Capital will spread fear in some way.

Maybe I should have left things alone instead of taking matters into my own hands.

Such thoughts sent a chill down my spine.

I was afraid that I now entertained such thoughts so casually.

Although I had heard about the precarious situation in the Imperial Capital from Antirianus, seeing it with my own eyes made it all the more real.

The Edina Archipelago was on the verge of collapse due to people's struggle for

survival, but compared to the Imperial Capital, it was almost like paradise. There were certainly starving people, but no one was dying of hunger.

CHAPTER 463

"Airi said that the psychological counseling for the refugees who arrived this time will likely be completed within three days. They'll probably organize their personal information and bring it soon."

"Ah, I see."

Although they didn't know when the next refugee transport ship would arrive, the succubi's management of the refugees was steadily improving.

Initially, they had overly relied on their power to control dreams, causing the refugees to become too infatuated with the succubi.

When sadness and despair turned into an obsession with the succubi, both the succubi and the refugees suffered.

Psychiatrists usually avoid building deep relationships with their clients.

The succubi were novices in such matters. They weren't skilled but had no choice but to perform their duties.

However, as time passed, such problems were occurring less frequently among the succubi.

For those with severe symptoms, the succubi periodically visited them after they left the temporary shelters, exchanging updates and managing their well-being.

It was a place that took care of not only the practical issues but also the psychological ones.

On reflection, it seemed like a rather nice place.

Of course, the bitter truth was that all they were doing was cleaning up the mess caused by me.

As Harriet and I walked down the hallway, Antirianus suddenly appeared from one

side, as if he had been waiting for us.

"Ah!"

Harriet let out a small scream and covered her mouth. Antirianus had a knack for surprising people by appearing out of nowhere.

Harriet knew that Antirianus was the second most cooperative member of the Council of Elders after Eleris.

However, just like me, Harriet couldn't bring herself to trust him.

Who could trust a subject who tried to cure one's sense of insecurity by kidnapping the king in the middle of the night?

Antirianus removed his hat and bowed deeply before me.

"Your Highness, how did you find the state of the kingdom through your own eyes?"

"About what you'd expect. It was a sight for sore eyes."

He must have wanted to see me despair upon witnessing it firsthand.

Antirianus' reaction to my response seemed somewhat bitter, his lips slightly twisted.

"What a wretched old man," I thought.

"Have you considered a way to bring the princess back?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'll have to think about it."

"Perhaps, if you discreetly request her return, they might release her easily? That is if the empire truly wants to protect the princess."

I nodded at Antirianus' words.

"Yes, I have considered that option."

It's possible that Bertus might release her if I ask.

"However, the empire will have a hard time justifying the disappearance of the princess. Ultimately, the empire will be in trouble. It's important to bring Charlotte back, but I cannot cause greater chaos in the empire."

The princess's disappearance would attract much attention.

The people would not easily believe the announcement of her sudden disappearance. There's already a considerable amount of distrust toward the royal family.

Rescuing Charlotte is not merely a matter of saving one person.

If the wrong approach is chosen, it might result in a massive riot. Having seen the restless state of the Empire firsthand, I could imagine the scale of such a riot.

Whether the Empire collapses due to the riot or slaughters the rioters, the situation is dire.

The former refers to the downfall of the Empire, and the latter to the long-term downfall of the Empire brought about by a large-scale massacre.

Thus, I must approach this issue with more caution than usual.

It is not that I necessarily wish for the empire to remain intact.

But neither do I wish for its outright destruction.

The empire must exist until the Gate incident is completely resolved and the monsters on the continent are wiped out.

That is why I do not hastily judge this seemingly simple issue that could be easily resolved if approached casually.

Antirianus subtly smiles at my cautious response.

"What about the issue of the Duke of Sarkegaar and the Lord of Wednesday… What do you plan to do about them?"

"…"

Antirianus touches on my predicament.

Those two.

Charlotte is Charlotte, but I still haven't been able to recover the two of them who are still detained in the empire.

—---

That night.

As usual, I was in the bedroom with Harriet, summarizing the day's events.

I had visited the Empire and talked with Antirianus, which had somewhat dampened my mood.

I had not even thought about rescuing the still living Lucinil and Sarkegaar.

There was too much to do.

No, it might just be an excuse.

I declared that if the empire killed Lucinil and Sarkegaar, we would become enemies. But I don't know where they are or how they are being treated.

I can only guess that they are under strict management in the imperial palace.

Antirianus conducts espionage activities in the imperial and royal territories, but he has no information about their whereabouts.

The fact that I still don't know their location is a clue in itself.

In future negotiations with the Empire, which could happen anytime and in any manner, they will serve as cards that the Empire can play.

Can I bring them back in exchange for protecting Charlotte?

It was a problem I couldn't approach recklessly.

"They'll both be safe."

At Harriet's words, I silently nodded.

But I couldn't help but doubt it.

"As you know, Sarkegaar was the mastermind behind the abduction of the Imperial princess and Empress during the last Great Demon War. I don't know about Lucinil, but… Sarkegaar could be dead."

The empire would now know about what Sarkegaar had done.

So, it's not impossible that they killed Sarkegaar for his actions.

And because I employed Sarkegaar, who did such a thing, their hatred towards me as the Demon King might still persist.

Sarkegaar.

More than anyone else, he wished for the reconstruction of the Demon World.

But I had no intention of fulfilling that desire.

Without Sarkegaar, I had become the king of a world that, albeit imperfectly, included demons.

I wondered what Sarkegaar would say if he saw this sight.

He might explode in anger at how we could live mixed with humans, or he might be deeply moved by the somehow rebuilt world.

I wanted to show this world to Sarkegaar, who had always been a loyal and faithful subject.

The fate of the world always hung in the balance, but I still wanted to show him the world we had somehow created.

It's fine if he criticizes me or rejoices.

I wanted to show Sarkegaar this sight, but the thought that he might already be dead made it feel like I was suffocating.

I could postpone thinking about my people whose deaths had been confirmed.

But when I thought of my people whose fates were uncertain, I felt like I was going mad with anxiety.

I had to save them.

Should I be doing this?

Can I keep putting off this task because there's too much to do?

I couldn't tell if she sensed my anxiety, but Harriet came to my side and wrapped her arms around my shoulder.

"We're always doing our best."

“…Our best might not be enough."

"Even so, we have to believe that it is."

At Harriet's words, I clenched my teeth.

The problem that needed solving but remained unresolved, Lucinil and Sarkegaar.

The new problem, Charlotte.

Could I solve these issues?

It was as if I had tried to save the world, only to cause its ruin.

Could I say with certainty that I wouldn't fail this time?

I had to do something, and so I did, and I had to move forward, so I moved forward.

But the fear brought on by the terrible failure still lay dormant within me, consciously avoiding confronting that fear.

Once again, the fear that my very existence could ruin everything was undoubtedly inside me.

I didn't know what to do or how to proceed.

But I had witnessed the reality of the empire with my own eyes, and now it was time to decide cautiously which method to choose.

At this time, Harriet would always sit on the bed, read a book, and fall asleep.

So when I woke up in the morning, I would see her asleep in a crouching position, the book open in her hands, as if she had fallen asleep without realizing it.

But today, Harriet sat hunched on the bed, doing nothing.

Seemingly deep in thought.

She didn't seem to be showing her feelings, but her eyes held a hint of sadness.

I had a feeling I knew what she was thinking.

I had visited the empire.

The empire.

The land of humans.

In the end, I had been discovered as the Demon King, but I had returned safely.

So naturally, Harriet couldn't help but think that if I could do it, perhaps she could too.

Harriet had as much to do as I did, if not more.

So it was only natural for her to think about what she had left behind.

The Three Traitors.

The names of the three who betrayed humanity.

Olivia Lanze.

Liana de Grantz.

Harriet de Saint Owan.

Harriet's situation was different from the other two.

Olivia had no family, and Liana's only family, the Duchess, was living quietly in Edina's villa.

Harriet couldn't help but think about and feel guilty about what she had left behind in the land of humans.

So, about the Saint Owan Duchy.

She must have been thinking about her family, including her father.

The daughter who betrayed humanity.

She couldn't help but think about and feel guilty for the Saint Owan Ducal family, who were experiencing real problems because of her.

So, even though Harriet appeared to be fine and even worried about me, she might have been the most tormented of all.

It was clear that her family, not herself, was paying the price for her choice to side with the Demon King.

Although Saint Owan Duchy had suffered tremendous damage, the capital Arnaca was safe under the protection of the Duke, as Harriet had said.

And now, the Duke was dedicating himself to the empire in place of his daughter who had betrayed humanity. The Duke had to prove that it was his daughter, not himself or the Duchy, who had chosen the Demon King.

Thus, the Duke, who was engaged in the war that determined the fate of humanity, was being punished in order to atone for his daughter's sins.

But even that might not have held great significance for the survival of the Ducal family.

The masses needed a scapegoat.

The Archduke of Saint Owan is now buying indulgences by being involved in the Gate incident due to the needs of the Empire and humanity.

However, once the Gate incident comes to an end, Saint Owan Duchy is highly likely to be the first to be sacrificed due to the wrath of the Empire's populace.

One of the three traitors who betrayed humanity, the Archduke of Saint Owan.

It's not that they're being sacrificed because they deserve it, but because they're the easiest target for sacrifice.

No matter how much Saint Owan Duchy contributes to the resolution of the Gate incident, the masses remain ignorant of such things.

That's why Harriet must be thinking every day that her actions must be accounted for not only by herself but also by her family and her people.

Perhaps even more than me.

Harriet may have been in more pain.

But Harriet never said a word to me about such issues.

She must have thought I was going through more hardships than she was.

I have visited the Empire.

So, Harriet must have wanted to see the situation of the Saint Owan Duchy firsthand.

Although she knew it was safe, she wanted to know the reality of the capital city of Saint Owan, Arnaca.

How her family, including the Archduke, were faring.

She would have wanted to confirm it with her own eyes.

"Mm."

“…Hmm?"

Harriet looks at me.

"Do you want to go to Arnaca?"

"Wha-?"

At my words, Harriet shudders and asks again.

She must not have expected me to say such a thing suddenly. I have many things to do, but in the end, I went to the Imperial Capital, just like I did.

There is no reason why Harriet and I cannot go to Arnaca for just one day.

Although my visit to the Imperial Capital left me with a terrible impression, I still went in the end.

There's no reason for Harriet not to stand on the path of returning home, even if it will only leave her with regrets.

My words must have been quite shocking, as Harriet's eyes wavered.

"Now that Lazak is on track, we can spare a day or so. So, if you want to go… we can take a day. No, what's a day? We can spare a few days."

Harriet's family, especially the Archduke, might try to confine her and not let her go.

But Harriet has been working for me for a long time.

Shouldn't Harriet, who has been suffering in silence without showing any signs, have the right to choose at least that much?

Whether to meet her family or not.

Harriet bites her lip and falls silent, deep in thought at my words.

It is Harriet's choice whether to meet her family or not.

But there is no risk in watching Arnaca with her own eyes.

The present situation of her hometown.

Isn't it possible to at least see that for herself?

"Will you… go with me?"

Harriet looks at me with trembling eyes.

Just as Harriet has protected me until now in case of any emergencies,

It is only natural that I follow her to protect her in case of any emergencies.

"Of course, I will."

At my words, Harriet finally covers her face with both hands and bursts into tears.

"Thank you… Reinhardt…"

What on earth is she so grateful to me for?

I've always been the one who should be grateful.

CHAPTER 464

Just as the empire had managed to defend the Imperial Capital and other important regions, some of the prominent vassal states had also managed to protect their capitals and large cities.

Although a considerable number of vassal states had been destroyed, there were still cities and nations that had managed to defend their capitals.

The Duchy of Saint Owan was one of the few countries that had successfully defended its capital.

This meant that, with the exception of the capital, the Duchy of Saint Owan had failed to defend all other regions.

The land of magic.

Excluding the empire, it was the country most proficient in magic. The Duchy of Saint Owan, which had produced many outstanding mages, remained strong in the face of the Gate crisis, at least in its capital.

The capital of the Duchy of Saint Owan, Arnaca.

Unlike the Imperial Capital Gradium, which had expanded grotesquely due to the influx of refugees, Arnaca had not undergone such a transformation.

After teleporting to a back alley in Arnaca, Harriet and I ventured out into the streets.

We could see that the once glorious city of magic had become a fortress.

Thick walls now surrounded the city, which had once been without walls, and tall towers were erected at regular intervals along those walls.

However, at the top of these towers, there were no watchtowers for reconnaissance. Instead, large blue crystals floated in the air.

"Towers… They seem similar."

"Yeah, they do."

It seemed that these towers were similar to defense towers, intended to intercept monsters that approached the city.

Harriet and I could not help but make such a conjecture.

I had disguised myself using Sarkegaar's ring, and Harriet had changed her appearance using illusion magic and wore a robe, so the people on the streets did not recognize us.

Nations that succeeded only in defending their capitals mostly became city-states.

Arnaca was no exception.

Refugees had not flocked to this place because most of them had gathered in the Imperial Capital.

Although not expanded, the city was still strong in its capital.

While we could not determine the state of their food supplies, there was no visible sign of hunger on the faces of the people.

Nevertheless, happiness and hope did not overflow either.

While it would be great if the empire could have a defense system like Arnaca's, the area it needed to defend was hundreds of times larger than Arnaca's.

Constructing such a vast defense system would have exhausted most of Arnaca's remaining national power. There must have been a reason why the empire could not use such a system.

Harriet silently looked at the streets and people of Arnaca.

Her expression was full of hidden guilt and sadness.

She couldn't help but think about the numerous cities and people that could not be saved, even though the capital was safe.

The white palace, Arunaria, seemingly carved out of the mountain, also remained intact.

The scenery of Arnaca had not changed much, except for the walls and towers surrounding the outskirts of the city.

The only change was the depression and despair that could be read from the faces of the people in the streets.

No one seemed to engage in conversation.

Arnaca had become a city filled with eerie silence.

Occasionally, Harriet had mentioned that she used to watch children playing in the tall towers of Arunaria.

However, now, even if we looked with the utmost care, we couldn't find any children playing.

Harriet was completely unrelated to the cause of the Gate crisis.

However, as if everything was her responsibility, she walked with a guilty expression alongside me.

The hometown that Harriet had longed for had become a city of silence filled with desolation.

-Snap!

We saw a flash of light in the center of the city, from afar.

It was in the place where a Warp Gate once was, we presumed.

Now seemingly used as a Warp Spot, a group appeared with a bright flash.

Harriet's eyes widened.

"Ah… Father…”

Duke Saint Owan and his band of mages revealed themselves through the Warp Spot.

As soon as the Duke and his mages arrived, the people nearby did not bow but hurriedly cleared the area.

As if they had seen something unholy.

As if used to such reactions, the Duke led his mages towards the White Palace without hesitation.

We saw the citizens witnessing the Duke and his mages, swiftly avoiding their path and closing their windows.

No one openly cursed them.

However, it was clear that everyone perceived the Duke as a figure to be avoided.

The quiet and silence of Arnaca.

We couldn't help but understand the reason.

The princess who sided with the Demon King.

Arnaca was safe for now, but we knew that once the situation was resolved, the Empire's retribution would begin against Saint Owan Duchy.

We knew the fate of Duke Saint Owan, his duchy, and Arnaca's future.

Yet, we couldn't leave Arnaca as the outside was not safe.

And so, they shunned the Duke as if they were facing the image of death itself.

Despite knowing that shunning the Duke would not save them from the dark fate awaiting the Saint Owan Duchy, they did so as if it would grant them absolution later.

"Father…"

With her father, the king, shunned before her, Harriet clenched her eyes shut.

Tears silently streamed down her face.

—---

We didn't expect brilliance from Arnaca.

Strictly speaking, Arnaca was in a better situation than other cities.

Towers protected the city, and the influx of people hadn't exceeded the city's capacity to sustain them.

However, everyone knew that the consequences of the princess's actions would soon descend upon them.

And so, the city was engulfed in melancholy.

Harriet and I stood at a distance where we could see the White Palace of Arunaria.

The people were not consumed by hatred and anger, but their expressions were filled with despair and depression.

That was the current state of Arnaca.

"If you want to see him, go ahead."

"…"

The guards protecting Arunaria were not human.

They were all magically created golems.

Therefore, Harriet could meet the Duke if she wished.

Harriet knew all the circumstances.

That the Gate incident was not caused by my will.

But the reality was that her choice might lead to the sacrifice of everyone in Arnaca.

"Do I… deserve to?"

She couldn't help but feel guilty.

Even if the Gate incident was not caused by my will, people wouldn't believe that.

Thus, if humanity's retribution were to descend upon Arnaca, Harriet would have no choice but to consider it her responsibility.

The responsibility for betraying humanity would fall upon the nation and its citizens, not the princess.

From that standpoint, Harriet couldn't help but think she had no right to face her father.

She might hear harsh words of reproach from her father for making such a foolish choice.

She might think her father would hold her and never let her go.

She might believe she would hear hateful and angry words from her family.

"Just because I called you a blockhead, you know I don't actually think you're stupid."

"…"

"In fact, the Duke of Saint Owan that I've met should be called a doting father."

Indeed, my first impression of the Duke of Saint Owan was that of a doting father.

"Just like you're not a fool, your father, the Duke of Saint Owan, isn't really a fool either."

I gently placed my hand on Harriet's face within the robe.

"Like you're wise, the Duke of Saint Owan, your father, is certainly a wise person as well."

"…"

"He must have tried to truly understand why you had to act that way and must have found some answers."

I believe the Duke of Saint Owan is a wise person, just like Harriet.

After all, Harriet de Saint Owan wasn't born for nothing.

"Ultimately, parents can't help but trust their children as much as they can't believe them."

Just as it's universal for parents to worry about their children, in some decisive moments of life, parents have no choice but to trust their children.

They would think there must have been an inevitability behind their children's crucial choices.

The Duke of Saint Owan couldn't be a fool.

"So, go."

That's why I don't think the Duke of Saint Owan would hold Harriet back and not let her go.

Harriet quietly held my hand that I placed on her face.

"Yes… I'll go."

Did my words give her some courage?

"And, I'll definitely come back."

Having come this far, she couldn't just leave after seeing the city's despair.

She had faced the heavy responsibility she had to bear.

Shouldn't she at least take the joy and sorrow of reunion with her?

—---

The Duchess who had disappeared with the Demon King returned.

But there was no commotion.

The security system of Arunaria was under the control of the ducal family, and there were very few servants in Arunaria.

The information reported through the golem did not reach the other nobles, and

only the members of the ducal family learned that the missing Duchess had visited.

The Duchess, who quietly entered the palace, was able to face her family after a very long time.

The returned Duchess could only be a sinner.

Contrary to Harriet's fear, the three brothers, including the Duchess of Saint Owan, did not blame their youngest sister, who had brought a great burden to the family.

It was just a tearful reunion.

Despite the lengthy conversation, neither Harriet nor the members of the ducal family uttered a single word about the Demon King.

They didn't even ask how she had been or where she had been.

It was as if it was already enough to know she was safe.

Her mother and three brothers.

Although it wasn't enough, after finishing the conversation, Harriet entered the Duke's study for the last time.

There was the Duke of Saint Owan, with an indelible fatigue on his face.

The Duke, who was always stern but always kind, and sometimes tried to control his daughter with force, had a very different look in his eyes as he looked at his daughter.

"Sit down."

Harriet sat down on the chair with a stiff expression, responding to the overly plain words that belied the reunion after a long time.

Important conversations always came from her father's mouth.

So did the scolding for doing something wrong.

The order to go to the temple.

The order to leave the temple.

All those words came from the Duke's mouth.

The reason none of the family members uttered a single word of reproach or blame was because they all knew it was the role of the Duke of Saint Owan.

Everyone knew that such words were part of the role of the eldest, so neither her mother nor her brothers ever mentioned it to Harriet.

To Harriet, her father was a bothersome man.

Bothersome enough to dote on her.

Bothersome enough to worry about her.

Bothersome enough to be overly fond of her.

But now, Harriet had made a choice that could lead to the downfall of her family, and she faced her father, the head of the household, as a sinner.

The overly fond daughter had made a decision that could shatter the long history of the Saint Owan family.

She had found courage in Reinhardt's words and returned to Arunaria.

Her family, whom she hadn't seen in a long time, rejoiced in her safe return.

But now, Harriet felt as though she was standing in the judgment seat.

She was expecting a detailed explanation of her sins and seemed to have to pay for them.

So now, for the first time in her life, Harriet de Saint Owan was afraid of her father's stern expression.

It's a relief that you're alive.

Welcome back.

Without uttering any such words, her father, who simply told her to sit in a chair as if she were standing in a courtroom, was frightening.

Sitting across from the duke, Harriet desperately stared into his eyes with a stern expression.

It seemed as though tears would spill out.

Her father, who had always embraced her and acted bothersome, was now not offering any comfort in this situation.

It's unfair.

Though she had made a mistake, a big mistake she knew, she just wanted him to embrace her now, since she would no longer find him bothersome.

She wanted to say that, but her mouth wouldn't open.

"Are you really back?"

At the Duke's question, Harriet quietly lowered her head.

She would have to leave soon, and even if she tried to return, it would be impossible.

The Duke seemed to understand and nodded his head.

"Do you know the choice you've made?"

"…"

The Duke silently looked at Harriet.

"If this situation doesn't end, humanity will be destroyed, and both the Saint Owan family and the Duchy will be finished."

"If this situation is resolved, the wrath of the Empire will be directed at our family, and both the Saint Owan family and the Duchy will be finished."

"My daughter."

"I'll only ask one thing."

"Was it a choice that you won't regret, even if such a thing happens?"

Countless deaths.

The destruction of the family.

Was it a choice she wouldn't regret even if such things happened?

In response to the head of the family's question, the youngest child stared silently into her father's eyes.

It wasn't a scolding or blame.

It wasn't a question about where she had been or what she had been doing.

Or why she had made such a choice.

It was a question as a member of the family, as an individual person.

Would you not regret the decision you made?

Harriet thought back to two years ago.

She had trusted Reinhardt. That's why she had made that decision and choice. She didn't know what was happening at the time when the Gate incident occurred.

But now, Harriet knew the whole truth.

Why the Gate incident happened, what Akasha was, and what people's misunderstandings were.

What kind of existence the Demon King truly was.

She knew everything now.

But, regret.

Her father asked about regret.

Would she not regret her decision if her hometown was destroyed and her entire family was killed as a result?

Harriet clenched her teeth and closed her eyes tightly.

"Regret… I think… I will…"

"…"

She couldn't help but regret it.

Tears streamed down Harriet's closed eyes.

"But… but… Dad… I… you know…"

"If… if I were to go back to that day two years ago… even if I knew… that everything would turn out like this… even if I knew…"

"I… I think… I would do the same thing…"

She would regret it.

Even if the Saint Owan Duchy were to be destroyed, and all the people of her family were to die.

She believed that she had to help Reinhardt.

She would regret it, but she would make this choice that could only lead to regret again.

It was not that she had failed to accomplish something.

Not just to help Reinhardt, but because she could have saved many people.

Now she knew that this choice didn't only lead to negative outcomes.

It wasn't that she didn't regret it, but even knowing that she couldn't help but regret it, the youngest child said she would still make the same choice.

Upon hearing those words, the Duke nodded silently, looking at his crying daughter.

"My daughter, you have the most exceptional talent in the long history of the Saint Owan family."

"…"

"Therefore, you are the wisest descendant in the history of our family."

The Duke rose from his seat, approached his weeping daughter, and gently placed a hand on her head.

"So I believe, as your father, that your decision is right."

"Uh… sob…"

"Now let's embrace, my daughter."

It was only then that Harriet could finally cry in the arms of the father she had so despised.

CHAPTER 465

Returning, Harriet wore a noticeably cheerful expression.

Simply by her countenance, it was apparent that Harriet had successfully concluded her conversation.

"We can stay for a few days."

"No, it's fine. If word gets out that I've returned, it could become troublesome. It's better for me to leave quickly."

Though the exact details of their conversation remained unknown, it was evident that the Archduke and his family had shown understanding towards Harriet.

The fate of the Duchy of Saint Owan remained uncertain. In addition, defenses in all cities beyond the capital had failed.

Would it be enough to move just the people of this city?

Arnaca was already a completed city, but it was uncertain whether the people's lives could be fully supported in Edina.

However, if they could migrate to Edina, they might be able to avoid the eventual wrath of humanity.

"It's uncertain how the Archduke will respond, but moving all of Arnaca's people to Edina could be a solution."

At my words, Harriet's eyes widened.

"Is that… possible?"

"The issue is that there is currently no way to do so. If we can find a way, it's definitely possible."

If there were warp gates, large-scale movement would be possible, but they were

currently unusable.

Physical movement was also impossible. No matter how skilled the Archduke was as a magician, he couldn't possibly lead the entire populace of the Duchy of Saint Owan, located in the northwest of the continent, on an epic journey to Port Mokna in the far south.

Teleporting the entire population was obviously impossible and not worth considering.

"For now, nothing will happen to Arnaca. Let's think about a solution gradually."

“…Alright."

Handling the Gate crisis was already an urgent matter. Thus, nothing would immediately happen to the Duchy of Saint Owan or the Archduke.

After the Gate crisis was resolved, moving the people of Saint Owan to Edina.

To some extent, I could sense the last shadow on Harriet's face disappearing at my words.

—---

Having reunited with her family after a very long time and having shared a fruitful conversation, not to mention the possibility of saving the people of Arnaca, Harriet seemed more spirited than before.

Upon returning to Edina, Harriet's expression had brightened considerably.

"Once the Gate crisis is resolved, perhaps we can improve the warp gates to directly connect Arnaca and the Edina Archipelago?"

"It would be great if we could do that… No, you can definitely do it."

"Right, if it's not possible, I'll make it possible."

Naturally, her spirited demeanor was a pleasure to behold.

Although she hadn't shown signs of depression or struggle, everyone had been

hiding it just the same.

The revitalized and energetic Harriet could only improve my mood as well.

I hadn't anticipated that my request for Harriet to research warp gates would help in such a way, but her research could ultimately provide a means to save her hometown's people.

Although all the warp gates across the continent were destroyed after a day, Harriet had already begun preparing blueprints for what would come next.

Of course, her workload had increased, and the already busy Harriet became even busier. However, this was ultimately a task to save people, and her family in particular, so there was no reason to refuse.

It was only natural for Harriet to seriously consider this matter, as it could alleviate the guilt and self-blame she had hidden for two years.

It was only natural for Harriet to do what she had to do, and for me to do the same.

—---

About a month had passed since our visit to Arnaca.

The complete resolution of the Gate incident was inevitably becoming more drawn out.

This was because the Warp Gates were not only spewing out increasingly powerful monsters, but their defenses were also getting stronger, requiring a more cautious approach to destroying each one.

Eleris said that it was no longer possible for her to destroy the Warp Gates alone, and it was only natural for the Empire's Saviolin Turner's forces to struggle more and more with the task of destroying the gates.

As the number of Warp Gates decreased, the speed of destroying the remaining ones slowed down, and countless casualties occurred.

Although the end was near, events unrelated to the Gate incident began to unfold one by one in a reality that seemed infinitely far away.

"Your Highness, I've heard that the princess is about to be executed."

"…"

And I had no choice but to face what was bound to happen someday.

"Why?"

Bertus had not responded to the demands of the crowd so far. That's why I thought he had enough will to protect Charlotte.

"Could it be because I revealed myself at the Imperial Palace last time?"

If the explosion of the crowd's anxiety made it impossible to ignore their demands any longer, then the root cause of this would ultimately be my responsibility.

Antirianus smiled slightly at my words.

"Although that cannot be ruled out as a cause, the important thing is that they seem unable to refuse the demands of the vassal states and the five major religious orders."

"…"

"They demand that the princess be sacrificed to stabilize the political situation."

On top of the already unstable Empire, the demands of the vassal states and the pressure from the five major religious orders came in.

The vassal states were key members of the Empire, and despite the weakening support from the crowds, the five major religious orders remained a powerful military force. The Empire could not ignore them.

The Gate incident was not yet over, but they were already acting as if it had ended.

The five major religious orders wanted to divert the blame to the princess to dilute the hatred towards themselves, and the vassal states wanted to remove the uncertainty of the princess to reaffirm their allegiance to the crumbling Empire.

So, did they have no choice but to agree?

"Emperor Bertus has decided to execute the princess at noon on Sunday in three weeks, at the Imperial Palace Grand Square."

"…"

Did Bertus have to choose between the Empire and Charlotte in the end?

However, Antirianus was still smiling.

"And, in addition to that, I've heard that the Vampire Lord and Duke Sarkegaar will be executed together."

"…What?"

"Just as you heard."

No.

It was one thing for Charlotte, but why would they also execute the other two?

Had Bertus forgotten my warning in just two years?

That touching Lucinil and Sarkegaar would make me their enemy - didn't he know that?

Antirianus was still chuckling as if he found the situation incredibly amusing.

His irritatingly joyful expression made me realize what this confusing and unpleasant situation meant.

Three weeks.

It's quite a long time.

Perhaps too much time, too lenient.

Bertus must know that I appeared at the Imperial Palace not long ago.

Soon, he would sense that I was watching the Imperial Palace from somewhere.

He didn't want to kill Charlotte.

Lucinil and Sarkegaar were included as well.

That fact told me quite a lot.

They held the execution without haste, instead allowing a considerable amount of time for the news to spread far and wide.

"They'll give us the two of them if we agree to take Charlotte."

My appearance at the scene would mean that I must take the three of them away by any means necessary.

The crowd yearned for Charlotte to face her judgment, so they could not secretly hand her over to me. Even if they wanted to, the Empire wouldn't know my whereabouts.

So, at the very moment they attempted to publicly judge Charlotte, the Demon King would seize her.

It would be a convenient excuse for the Empire.

They would claim that they intended to comply with the people's demands, but what could they do when the Demon King appeared?

Ultimately, Bertus would no longer be able to protect Charlotte.

Therefore, his true intention in orchestrating this situation was to return his two subordinates in exchange for taking Charlotte away as well.

"Really… it's an outrageous and breathtaking plan…"

In my absence, they convey their reliance on me in this manner.

It was truly astonishing.

Would my unintentional appearance on the Imperial Capital ultimately lead to the recovery of not only Charlotte, but also Sarkegaar and Lucinil?

Three weeks later, on Sunday at noon.

Although we had never agreed upon it, we had to stage a fabricated abduction.

At this point in time, Reinhardt was unaware of one thing.

"Three weeks from now, it's Sunday, sister."

"…"

Charlotte sat listlessly on the bed, her expression dark, and nodded her head.

It wasn't that Bertus had failed to endure.

Charlotte herself had wanted this.

Because her existence was a burden to both humanity and the Empire. If her seemingly worthless life could provide even a small amount of relief to others, then so be it.

If they forced her to live, the Empire would crumble.

Although the demands of the vassal states and the Five Great Churches played a role, this was happening because Charlotte had requested her own execution.

Bertus had naturally refused.

He said it was absolutely impossible.

That such a thing would never happen.

The words that came from the siblings' mouths after a long time were a plea for death.

She asked to be killed to prolong the Empire's lifespan, even if only by a little. As her very existence was the seed of division, she believed that she must do something, even if it meant dying.

Since her very existence was causing the Empire to fracture in real-time, wouldn't it be better to die?

To give up.

To resign oneself.

To regret.

Having reached the point of self-loathing, Charlotte had no attachment left to life.

Bertus's decision was not born of exhaustion from the demands of the crowd, the Empire, or the Five Great Churches.

He feared that if she wasn't executed, she would commit suicide in the Spring Palace.

So, this was the only solution he could desperately come up with.

Bertus did not tell Charlotte anything.

That Reinhardt had appeared on the Imperial Capital.

That Reinhardt was watching from somewhere on the Imperial Capital.

That he still tried to protect the people.

He did not tell her because he knew that such words would only deepen Charlotte's self-loathing.

And so, this was Bertus's own decision.

Charlotte knew only that in three weeks, she would be burnt at the stake alone in the central square.

She did not say that anyone might come.

Charlotte did not know who would be hanged with her.

He didn't mention it at all. Bertus would never allow such a thing to happen to her.

If she thought she couldn't be forgiven, she would strangle herself if Reinhardt said he would come to save her.

It would be fine if Reinhardt did not show up at the appointed time in three weeks.

Bertus would save Charlotte, even if he had to create his own farce.

Although she couldn't return to the Imperial Capital, he would make sure she could live quietly somewhere.

He didn't know how to make his sibling, who had given up on life, live in any way.

The only thing he could do was not to make Charlotte affirm her life and live on, but to make sure she did not die.

That was all.

Only Reinhardt could save Charlotte.

So, Bertus spoke to the invisible Reinhardt.

Please.

Let Charlotte live a little longer.

He knew such a request was shameless, but he begged for Charlotte's forgiveness.

He couldn't forgive himself, but still, he asked to forgive Charlotte.

In fact, it was no different from an Emperor begging the Demon King.

Since the empire could not protect Charlotte, the Demon King would.

"Brother."

"…"

Charlotte, thinking she didn't deserve forgiveness, would likely refuse if she knew his plan.

So, Bertus had no intention of telling her this story.

Approaching the silent Charlotte, Bertus pulled up a chair and sat down.

Charlotte must have been lost in self-reproach, not only because she couldn't trust the Demon King but also because of the countless tragedies that unfolded.

She would not allow herself to receive Reinhardt's forgiveness and protection in a safe place.

Bertus quietly watched his sister, who had turned into a demonic figure. Charlotte's red eyes stared back at him.

If Reinhardt took Charlotte away, and if Reinhardt truly appeared, Charlotte would be under the Demon King's protection.

Because Bertus could not protect Charlotte.

The Demon King would not reveal his whereabouts.

So, the last time Bertus would see Charlotte would be for three weeks.

They had despised each other to the point of wanting to kill one another. And they had tried to kill each other several times.

He didn't know when it had become like this.

But at some point, seeing Charlotte, who had become too weak to be considered a rival, Bertus's thoughts had changed.

A rival not worth competing against.

A defeated rival.

When the misunderstanding about the Demon King hadn't been cleared, he had pitied his sibling, who had been used by Reinhardt from beginning to end.

And now, she couldn't even control herself.

Her world had become like this because of herself, and she had buried herself in the

cursed words she had thrown at the Demon King, leaving her with nothing but guilt, self-blame, and self-mockery.

The previous emperor had died, and Bertus had succeeded him.

Since then, Bertus had wanted to protect Charlotte in any way possible.

From the moment everyone in the world despised Charlotte, Bertus had tried his best to protect her.

Ignoring the countless ministers who poured out suspicions that Charlotte was related to the Demon King, not just the crowds, Bertus had disregarded all of their words.

Somehow, he wanted his miserable sibling to survive.

And now, Bertus entrusted the task he couldn't do himself to the Demon King.

Bertus gazed into the red eyes of Charlotte, who stared back at him solemnly.

This was the end.

It had to be the end.

"Sister…"

"…"

"May I embrace you?"

At Bertus's words, Charlotte's eyes widened in surprise.

Seeing the traces of emotion return to those lifeless eyes for the first time in a long while, Bertus forced a bitter smile.

Just as Bertus had done, Charlotte had watched her despised brother trying to protect her throughout this terrible time.

Only after everything had been ruined.

Only after she had destroyed everything with her own hands.

It was perhaps inevitable that a sense of brotherly love, which had never existed and could not have existed, would emerge between the two.

Charlotte did not know what was about to happen.

That's why she thought Bertus was apologizing for deciding to kill her, no matter how much he claimed it was at her request.

Charlotte chose death for herself.

Out of guilt.

As she hesitated, watching Bertus say such words from within his guilt, Charlotte slowly leaned in.

She was going to die.

After hesitating for a while, Charlotte slowly leaned towards Bertus.

Bertus pulled Charlotte's small, frail head to his chest and hugged her.

It was the first time either of them had done such a thing.

Had she always been this small?

Bertus thought as he embraced his sister for the first time.

"You must go… to a good place…"

"…"

Bertus could only say that, fearing that if he spoke more specifically, his intelligent sister, even weakened as she was, might understand what he meant.

So Charlotte began to cry, little by little, as she was held by Bertus.

A good place.

Would it be right for her to be allowed such a place?

If she died, she should fall into the fiery pits of hell for the sins she committed in bringing about these events.

Could she go to a good place even in death?

Believing that she shouldn't be able to, Charlotte wept in her brother's arms, little by little.

"…"

If Reinhardt came.

And took Charlotte with him.

Living with the Demon King would at least be better than living in this spring palace.

She would receive Reinhardt's forgiveness, and while the guilt and anguish would remain, it would be a better life than being confined to a dark bedroom, doing nothing.

Her diminishing speech would gradually increase, and she would find something to do.

In that way, she would lead a better life than now, away from Bertus's sight.

Reinhardt could do what she couldn't.

As an emperor, Bertus had to take responsibility for what he had done.

Charlotte, who had not become an empress, would have nothing to be responsible for and would live under the protection of the Demon King.

That's why Reinhardt had to come.

Bertus believed that he would definitely come.

After countless incidents resulting from not trusting Reinhardt when it was most needed, Bertus now trusted him.

He knew it was a terrible thing.

He knew he was making a terrible demand on Reinhardt.

But there was no other way.

Bertus could think of nothing else but this choice.

"I'm sorry… I'm so sorry, my sister…”

In the midst of Bertus's apology.

Within that first embrace, Charlotte, who believed that death, not survival, awaited her, lowered her head.

"No…”

With a strained, cracked voice, Charlotte struggled to speak.

"It's me… I'm even more sorry…”

She could at least say that much.

"Until now… truly, truly… thank you."

And not only did she lean into the embrace, but she also moved her slender arm and, with all her strength, hugged her brother back.

She could do that much.

CHAPTER 466

The execution of the princess could solve quite a few problems for the empire.

First and foremost, it would temporarily appease the anger of the crowds searching for a scapegoat.

By diverting the negative attention from the Five Great Holy Religions through the princess's execution, they could shift that scrutiny elsewhere.

The vassal kingdoms, unaware of the truth, had also grown distrustful of the empire for harboring the cursed princess. Now, that mistrust could be resolved.

Ultimately, the empire could dispel any suspicions that the royal family had been involved with the Demon King due to their protection of the princess.

Although the execution of Charlotte de Gardias could not physically resolve much, it did address a number of political issues.

Of course, this was only a temporary measure.

As long as the symbol of hatred, the Demon King, remained, only a temporary truce was possible. These issues would inevitably fester and erupt once more.

Even if the empire were to actually execute the princess, it would only buy them time.

It might merely delay the empire's inevitable decline and fall, and the fracturing and collapse of the empire could already be predestined.

Only the emperor knew the true intentions behind this event within the empire.

The people were excited about the simultaneous execution of the Demon King's two minions, oblivious to the real intentions behind it.

However, there were a few who could guess the true motives without the emperor saying anything.

“…Do you think Reinhardt will come?"

"Yes."

Ellen couldn't find anything to say in response to Bertus' words.

Would Reinhardt come, or would he not?

He must come; he has no choice but to come.

Ellen believed that.

But knowing that such a thing would happen, was it right to use Reinhardt like this?

Was it acceptable to exploit Reinhardt so blatantly now that those who once distrusted him have come to trust him?

Even though it wasn't her concern, Ellen couldn't shake off these doubts.

Reinhardt would come.

As he always had, he would try to save Charlotte this time as well.

Was she envious of that?

"…”

She knew it was shameless to hope for that.

But Ellen couldn't help but harbor those thoughts.

—---

The opportunity to bring Charlotte back was created by Bertus, not me.

Moreover, it was an unexpected chance to reclaim Lucinil and Sarkegaar as well.

If I were to take Charlotte, I would have to reveal myself in this situation.

This would involve taking risks and potentially damaging the empire's reputation by

having an important figure snatched away by the Demon King during an execution.

Bertus was willing to take on that situation, and I had to take on the risk of rescuing the princess, Lucinil, and Sarkegaar from the heart of the empire.

Three weeks later, on Sunday.

Naturally, the empire's elites were busy trying to resolve the Gate situation.

As a result, the guards protecting the crowded execution grounds and the massive scaffold didn't seem to be of particularly high caliber.

It was undoubtedly an intentionally lax security system.

It was a laughable play.

The emperor orchestrated this event to make the princess flee the empire, and the Demon King agreed to it.

It was amusing that such an agreement had been reached without Bertus and I exchanging a single word.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!”

However, the crowds, excited by the news of the princess's impending execution, were screaming and cheering.

The scenery of the empire had changed dramatically since I had last seen it.

The people's faces remained the same, but they were all enthralled. As if something would change when the princess died.

I wondered what they would think if the princess was kidnapped by me.

Would they remember Charlotte as an innocent, ignorant girl who was kidnapped twice by the Demon King?

Or would they remember her as the Demon King's accomplice, so important that the Demon King himself had to come to her rescue?

What did Charlotte think of me now?

I didn't know.

All I knew was that I had a job to do.

As I always had.

Bertus wouldn't have too many guards in place for me to take Charlotte, along with Lucinil and Sarkegaar.

If the best of the best were leading this staged execution, some of them might end up dying in a forced fight. That would be a comedy that wasn't even funny.

I would break through the executioners and guards, knock them down just enough, and disappear with a mass teleport.

There was no need to see bloodshed.

I could kill a few people if I had to proclaim myself as the Demon King and unite humanity in fear of me, but I still didn't want to kill people for no reason.

After all, it wasn't an operation that required a large army.

I brought Antirianus and Harriet with me.

Liana, who hated the empire, was not suitable for this kind of job, and neither was Olivia.

"Kill her! Kill the princess!"

The three of us watched from afar as the crowd shouted.

A massive throng of people was engulfed in madness, shouting for the princess's death.

And there they were.

Three figures tied to stakes on top of a pile of wood, dangling from poles.

On the left was the silver-haired girl, Lucinil.

On the right was Sarkegaar, bound with black-feathered wings, taking the form of a demon.

And in the center.

Charlotte, her hair dyed pitch-black, hung her head weakly, tied to the stake.

Not only Sarkegaar, but the thick black mist emanating from the princess's body made everyone realize that she had become a sinister being.

Look at that.

They claimed the princess was cursed.

It wasn't the princess who returned from the Demon King's realm, but a demon disguised as the princess, and now her true form was revealed.

Such cries came from the people.

I didn't know if Sarkegaar and Lucinil understood the situation.

But Charlotte hung her head in resignation.

It wasn't that she was afraid of the people's hatred for her.

It seemed that she was afraid to meet the eyes of the people.

I would save the three of them.

It was an easy task.

All I had to do was break through the crowd, split the stakes, and use the mass teleport to escape.

That's all.

A very simple task.

As I was about to make my move, watching the crowd from afar.

"We have a problem."

Harriet grabbed the hem of my robe.

"A problem…?"

Harriet's face, visible through the inside of my robe, turned pale, indicating a serious issue.

"The spatial coordinates of this entire square are distorted."

"What? What does that mean?"

Similarly, Antirianus, who was also wearing a robe, looked at me and showed a faint smile.

"Your Greatness, it means that a barrier has been formed across this entire square, blocking spatial movement."

“…What?"

What on earth…

What kind of nonsense is this?

If a space-blocking barrier is set up across the entire area, I can't choose to break through, save the three of them, and then immediately escape using a mass teleport scroll.

I have to break through the crowd – Somehow, they had to break through this crowd.

Why on earth did Bertus set up such defenses?

Could it be that Bertus really intended to kill Charlotte?

There's no way he would do that, right?

Antirianus began to chuckle.

"Heh… it seems we were not the only ones who had various thoughts during the time given to us."

Another power.

"Is it not possible that others sensed the Demon King would appear here?"

Did completely unrelated people interfere in this situation?

"O great one, what will you do?"

Antirianus laughed.

When he told me this story, had Antirianus already sensed that something like this would happen?

He deliberately didn't tell me.

"This… crazy old man…"

As if he had received a compliment, Antirianus only laughed even more deeply.

The Emperor did not go to the execution ground.

He simply watched the scene from the high spire of the palace wall, magnifying the view.

There was no reason for him to carry out the execution himself, and he did not have the confidence to face Reinhardt at the site.

From a distance, the only thing Bertus could do was watch Reinhardt save Charlotte.

The angry and hateful cheers from the boiling crowd in the plaza were audible to Bertus.

So much hatred.

Why do they hate this much?

Why?

Bertus clenched his teeth as he watched the scene.

Waiting for Reinhardt to appear.

If he didn't show up, waiting to execute the next plan.

"Your Majesty, there seems to be a problem."

“…A problem?"

"We don't know who set it up, but a spatial movement barrier has been formed throughout the area around the plaza."

“…What?"

Bertus's complexion turned ashen at the words of the royal magician guarding him.

Reinhardt's thoughts and Bertus's thoughts were not very different.

Bertus knew that Reinhardt had many highly skilled magicians.

That's why he thought it would be a simple matter of breaking into the scene and escaping via teleport.

If Reinhardt appeared, everything would be resolved.

There was no need for a big fight, a conflict, and Bertus was certain Reinhardt wouldn't cause a large-scale massacre.

However, the presence of the spatial movement barrier meant that even if Reinhardt appeared, he would have to break through the crowd to escape beyond the barrier.

If Reinhardt tried to force his way through the crowd, a massive slaughter would ensue.

Bertus knew Reinhardt wouldn't want that.

"Who are these bastards…”

"I apologize, Your Majesty. At this distance, we can't determine who installed it or for

what purpose."

The distance was too great.

Reinhardt wouldn't do such a thing, and Bertus hadn't ordered it.

That meant another power had interfered.

"What kind of bastards… realized that the Demon King would come here…"

In the end, placing Charlotte and two of the Demon King's subordinates on the execution ground had become bait to lure the Demon King here.

"Do they… want to kill the Demon King… Reinhardt?"

Installing the spatial movement barrier meant they wanted to kill him without giving him a chance to escape once he revealed himself.

Just as Bertus noticed, if Reinhardt was really there, he would have no choice but to realize this situation.

Although it wasn't a trap he set, the situation had effectively become a trap.

It was impossible to know who they were, but the moment the Demon King revealed himself, the ambush would begin.

Considering the enemy had likely made thorough preparations, it would be a wise and natural decision for Reinhardt to retreat from this place.

Bertus clenched his teeth.

Only a handful knew that today's execution was a ploy to lure the Demon King and take the Imperial Princess away.

Naturally, the executioners were not aware of this intent.

If Reinhardt withdrew, the execution would proceed as scheduled.

Even if they did not die in the flames of the pyre, the executioners would surely find a way to end the lives of the Demon King's two minions and the Imperial Princess.

If Reinhardt stepped forward, he would be ambushed.

But if Reinhardt retreated, the Demon King's two minions and Charlotte would die.

"Who the hell… are these bastards…?"

With his eyes wide open, Bertus observed the boiling rage and madness that filled the square.

—---

“Aaaaaah!”

“Kill them! Kill them!”

“Kill the filthy demons!”

Amidst the madness and anger, I silently stared at Antirianus. Herriet's face was pale, and she could only bite her lips.

"Did you know it would come to this?"

"How can I casually predict the future, oh great one?"

"You knew this would happen, but you didn't tell me, did you?"

"Of course, but…”

He didn't even try to hide his malice.

What I thought was a simple problem turned out to be a terrible fork in the road, presenting two dreadful choices.

Knowing that the planned ambush would start, should I dive into the scene, save Charlotte, break through the crowd, and flee?

Or should I stand by and watch as Charlotte, Lucinil, and Sarkegaar die?

Antirianus enjoys putting me in such situations.

That monster would be satisfied with whatever choice I made.

He would take pleasure in watching me die from foolish attachment if I chose the first option.

He would also be delighted if I succeeded in rescuing the three of them by choosing the first option.

And he would enjoy watching me despair in the reality where I had to exchange my life for theirs if I chose the second option.

He enjoyed driving me to the extreme, regardless of what I did.

Antirianus did not advise me on the aspects I hadn't considered.

He wanted me to arrive at this place without knowing, so he could enjoy it.

“Aaaaaaaaaah!”

As the angry crowd roared, the execution was about to commence.

Would I die if I went in?

If I, an Archdemon, were to die for the sake of saving Charlotte and the other two, what would become of Edina Archipelago?

Without an Archdemon, the Edina Archipelago's control system would not be sustainable.

No, I might not even be able to save the three of them, and the Demon King could die like a fool alongside them.

I don't know who's planning to ambush me.

I haven't even reached the Master level yet.

So, I shouldn't do it.

I know.

I shouldn't save them.

Too many lives and destinies are at stake for the sake of just one life, mine.

I would be weighing the lives of millions against saving only three.

Even if I could actually save them, a ruler should not risk their life in such matters.

A ruler is meant to command, not to wield a sword.

This is reckless.

But.

If I hadn't done those reckless things, if I had lived like that,

I would never have been able to stand up to my seniors.

I wouldn't have fought a duel with my senior.

From that point on, countless reckless acts had led me here, ultimately reaching the seat of the Demon King. Had I not acted in such a way, this great achievement could not have been mine.

I would not have had the numerous relationships that I did, and consequently, I would not have had relationships that I had to lose.

There would have been no relationships I wanted to regain.

It is right not to engage in reckless acts.

However, standing atop the mountain built upon my recklessness, I cannot help but think that refraining from something due to its recklessness is merely an excuse for complacency.

That would be cowardly.

It would be nothing more than defeatism.

I, who had been reckless, had completed the person I am now solely through

recklessness.

I cannot say that I must not do this because it is too reckless.

A ruler should not engage in such acts.

A ruler bears too much responsibility to risk their life in such affairs.

One must abandon what needs to be abandoned.

And take what needs to be taken.

That is the only way.

However, I have never believed that I was a fitting ruler.

I have never done anything because I thought I could.

I did it because I had to.

I have always thought that I must do it.

I never believed that everything would work out somehow.

It was not because I thought everything was possible that I undertook every task.

“Waaaaah!”

The scream continued.

"I'll go alone."

As I look at the enraged crowd, I take a step forward.

"Harriet, neutralize the teleportation interference."

"Yeah… I'll try."

"Antirianus, provide long-range support."

"Yes, Your Greatness."

Charlotte de Gardias.

Sarkegaar.

Lucinil.

Today, I will save you all.

This time, and the next.

Always.

I will save you all.

That is the path of the ruler I choose to follow.

CHAPTER 467

Ellen Artorius was also watching the situation unfold.

Worried that people might recognize her, she wore a robe that covered her face and clenched her fists as she observed the events.

However, Ellen was unaware of the spatial teleportation barrier that surrounded her.

There was only one thought in her mind.

Would Reinhardt really appear?

If he did, she had no intention of pretending not to know him.

She had no right to ask him to take her with him. So she couldn't.

Ellen knew she was shouldering too much to simply abandon the people around her.

Knowing that her disappearance alone would already be an enormous sin, she couldn't choose to move past her guilt toward Reinhardt.

She wished she could at least see him from a distance.

That would be enough.

That would be sufficient.

All the while hoping that no one would get hurt in the process.

So, amidst the frenzied crowd, she stood still, watching the execution platform.

Charlotte bowed her head, simply waiting for her death to approach.

Charlotte knew nothing.

She knew nothing of what would happen next.

If she were the one tied up there, would Reinhardt do the same for her?

Though choosing such an option was impossible now that she had become the hope of humanity, she could still fantasize about it.

Because she could still think about it.

Ellen watched Charlotte from afar. If Reinhardt came, Charlotte would be saved and forgiven.

Amidst the deafening screams, the executioners prepared for the execution at a slow pace.

In truth, the act of burning them was more of a show.

None of the three tied up were beings who should die in the flames of burning wood.

They should have been stabbed with a spear, or had their heads chopped off with an axe.

However, if Reinhardt appeared, that wouldn't happen.

The three of them would be rescued.

As the executioners' torches touched the three piles of wood, flames began to rise at a terrifying speed.

“Aaaaaaah!”

“Kill them! Kill them!”

“Kill the demons!”

“Kill the demons!”

Amidst the ear-splitting noise, Ellen could see it.

Someone making their way through the crowd.

Pushing the crowd aside with ease, and walking up to the base of the execution

platform.

Thud!

With a single kick, that person blew away the burning pile of wood as if causing an explosion.

And so.

Thud! Thud!

The other three piles of wood were shattered with a single kick each.

Suddenly, the intruder appeared.

As that person removed their robe, a young man with the appearance of a horned demon was revealed.

Although it was her first time seeing him, Ellen knew it was Reinhardt.

"These three are rightfully mine to reclaim…"

The Demon King snapped his fingers.

"I will take them."

Rumble!

Instantly, a ferocious firestorm erupted around the three stakes.

The executioners and the surrounding guards, pale-faced, were forced back by the sudden flames.

"Rein… hardt…"

The… the Demon King!

It's the Demon King!

The Demon King has appeared!

Naturally, the cheers of the people turned into chaos as the unidentified demon made his entrance.

Those who had despised the Demon King and the demons now fled in terror as the real Demon King appeared.

And then.

Screeeeech!

With a fierce sound tearing through the air, dozens of fireballs rained down from the sky, striking the wall of fire.

"What… is this?"

Judging by the direction of the attack, it seemed as if it was not the minions of the Demon King who were responsible, but rather someone targeting the Demon King himself.

-Boom!

The rain of fireballs began to sweep not only those inside the barrier but also the executioners and countless people beyond it.

Ellen stood with her mouth agape, staring at the scene in disbelief.

The Demon King had appeared.

And someone, as if waiting for this very moment, began to attack him.

As if it didn't matter what happened to the crowd gathered at this place.

The panicked people tried to flee from the sudden destruction.

People trampled over each other, tangling and falling.

In an instant, those trying to escape were crushed underfoot by the others.

And then, Ellen saw it.

-Crash!

-Bang!

Breaking through the windows of the surrounding buildings, numerous unidentified individuals clad in black robes rushed towards the scene, not away from it.

"What is… what on earth is this?"

-Rumble!

Ellen watched, horrified, as countless destructive spells rained down, not only beyond the fiery barrier where the Demon King stood, but also mercilessly sweeping away the civilians caught in the crossfire.

-Roar!

Suddenly, the barrier of fire disappeared, revealing Reinhardt within.

Somehow, Reinhardt had managed to rescue all three individuals from the execution platform.

Amidst the chaos, Ellen saw Reinhardt observing the fleeing crowd, those caught in the magical crossfire, and the unidentified attackers.

“The Order… It was you.”

“Yes.”

“We could never have been eternal friends.”

Ellen didn't understand what they were talking about.

However.

Reinhardt handed over the unconscious Charlotte to Sarkegaar.

"You and Sarkegaar should escape first. Their target is most likely me. They'll probably try to kill only me."

“Archdemon, but…”

“Your Highness, we cannot…”

“Go, this is an order.”

Now freed from their bindings, the demon-like figure and the silver-haired girl hesitated. However, they obeyed the weight of the Demon King's command and began to disengage from the battle.

As if they knew they couldn't avoid the fight.

Lightning rained down from the sky, accompanied by falling fireballs.

But it wasn't just magic.

Individuals wielding swords and spears charged at the Demon King, wrapped in blue magical energy.

Their identities were unknown, but they were clearly no ordinary fighters.

"Stop."

Although one of the attackers did not stop at Reinhardt's command, Ellen clearly saw the hesitation in their movement.

-Tsk!

Alsbringer cut the attacker's throat, easily shattering the enhanced defense and barrier provided by their Magic Body Strengthening. A ferocious strike that made use of the war god's relic, which empowered its user the stronger the opponent they faced.

In this very moment, the Demon King could maximize the power of Alsbringer.

He wasn't a Master Class.

Yet, the overwhelming barrage of magical attacks couldn't penetrate the fiery magical barrier that flowed around the Demon King, extending for about two meters.

The sight of such immense magical output was overwhelming.

And his incredible strength.

“Gasp! Aaagh!”

With his right hand, he sliced through both the spear and the spear-wielder at the waist, while with his left fist, he shattered the man who was about to thrust his sword, merely by clashing with the weapon.

A Master Class wouldn't wield their power so brutally.

Instead, they would simply unleash their tremendous output as it was.

The unrefined destructive power it emitted prevented the Demon King from making a single concentrated attack.

Knowing that an unlimited charge would not be enough to pierce the Demon King, the mysterious assailants broke through the fleeing crowd and kept watch over him.

The Demon King looked at the countless dead.

The densely packed crowd had already suffered the deaths of thousands due to the Black Order's magic.

They were dying not by the Demon King's hand, but by the hands of those who sought to kill him.

"If you can kill me, it doesn't matter what happens, right?"

The Black Order didn't respond to the Demon King's murmur.

"Yes, there are many things in the world that cannot be helped."

"Like my own situation."

"Yours too, I suppose."

"I understand."

"I understand completely."

The Demon King walked slowly.

"So, let's kill and be killed by each other, as helpless people do."

The Demon King's eyes bulged with anger.

Roar!

The Demon King charged.

And the Black Order's operatives blocked his path.

—---

Epinhauser saved me, regardless of his affiliation with the Black Order.

So, like Antirianus had warned, I knew that the Order was no longer on my side.

But I never thought they would be willing to kill me at the expense of so many civilian casualties in this situation.

The Black Order.

Though I don't know much about them, they are a group that will endure evil for the sake of justice.

It's laughable, but in the end, they seem like those similar to me, in that they are willing to do what it takes to achieve their goals.

What's important is not arguing about each other's morality.

We are both helpless.

I must save my people.

And the Black Order seeks to remove me, the seed of a massive conflict.

As our helplessness clashes, someone must die.

I cannot be the one to die.

So, I must kill.

Screech!

The opponent's sword, which had clashed with my Alsbringer, wobbled heavily.

Clang!

"!"

I tried to reach out and choke my opponent’s neck in the gap, but a sudden chain of magical energy wrapped around my left arm.

Whether it was another attacker's magic or not, the chain of magical energy gripped my arm and refused to let go.

The attacker who had wobbled heavily from my strike lunged forward to pierce my throat.

Squelch!

The opponent’s blade, stopped by my Magic Body Strengthening defense, failed to penetrate my neck.

"Gasp!"

Crash!

As I pulled my left arm hard, the magical chain shattered, unable to withstand my strength.

Most of the enemies specialized in close combat, could strengthen themselves with Magic Body Strengthening, and even knew how to use spells.

Close combat experts, mages, and even magic swordsmen.

Of course, it had to be this way, but the Black Order was a group of insane monsters.

As soon as I appeared, it was clear they were determined to kill me.

There were not only those who simply fought in close combat, but also those who sniped from a distance.

The square was still filled with people.

Many were trying to escape, but the crowd was so packed that they couldn't.

The number of people dying under the Black Order's magic was far exceeded by those who were crushed by the panicked crowd.

Among them were not only those who could merely strengthen themselves with Magic Body Strengthening but also master-class fighters.

I already knew that the Black Order was not a group made up solely of mages, thanks to the case with Master Epinhauser.

There were those who watched me from afar, waiting for the most crucial moment.

Having lured me into a war of attrition by sending their pawns, they must be waiting for a clear opening to strike or cut me down.

Attacking with weapons imbued with aura would be the most certain method.

Since they know they can't penetrate my Magic Body Strengthening barrier with destructive spells, they seemed to be trying a different approach.

Whump!

Suddenly, vines sprouted from the ground, wrapping around my arms and legs at an incredible speed.

And from those vines, countless insects crawled out, covering my body.

Black Order.

They had many forbidden techniques.

Just seeing them in action was revolting.

"Burn."

I didn't know what kind of insects these were, but I had no intention of letting them burrow into my body.

Roar!

The flame of Tuesday burst into light, pouring out ferocious heat.

The vines and insects enveloping my body turned into black ashes and disappeared in an instant.

I don't need to kill them all.

All I need to do is escape the square. I don't know what Antirianus is up to, but as long as I confirm that Lucinil, Sarkegaar, and Charlotte safely escape, I can leave my position.

Of course, they're watching me from all directions, and the Order is not using their full power right now.

It was clear that they were trying to gauge my strength.

They were just watching, waiting for a sure opportunity to kill me.

Long-range support was a certainty.

Thwack! Thwack!

Bats flew all around, tearing apart and killing the magicians who were attacking me from a distance, turning them into bloody messes. I could clearly see it all.

That old hag Antirianus. I didn't know he could use a technique similar to cloning.

Fortunately, the magicians attacking from a distance were too distracted by Antirianus.

People were fleeing, but they were clearly watching the spectacle.

That's why the Empire can't help me, and they shouldn't.

I have to get out of here on my own.

Still, something is strange.

I quietly watch those keeping their distance.

There were a few of them who were certainly at the Master Class level, and while it's not certain, there should also be some on par with Archmages.

The magicians who wouldn't easily fall for Antirianus were waging a guerrilla war.

"But why are you only this strong?"

But why is the Black Order only this strong?

It's true that they have considerable power, and many things are difficult for me to handle alone.

But if their goal is to kill me, it means that the Black Order's power must be concentrated in this place.

While they are certainly not to be taken lightly,

Considering what I had imagined to be the Black Order's elite, they were too shabby.

"The Empire and you weren't the only ones dealing with the Gate incident on your own."

Someone who had been watching me from a distance walked towards me.

"That's it."

The Black Order only appeared once in the original story, and there was no mention of them afterward.

That means they must have been dealing with the Gate incident and monsters in the background of the story.

Two years after the Gate incident.

The Black Order must have fought and fought to deal with the Gate incident themselves.

In doing so, they naturally weakened.

Losing their warriors one after another.

It's true that they have considerable power, but to gather this much to eliminate me, the most crucial seed of conflict, is not enough.

The Black Order was waiting for me at a location where they could predict I would have no choice but to come.

The person walking towards me removed his hood and revealed his face.

Naturally, it was a middle-aged man I had never seen before.

I couldn't tell his actual age just by looking at him.

Although he was middle-aged, his white, grizzled hair made it difficult to guess his age.

As he approached me, the other members of the Black Order who had been confronting me began to slowly retreat.

This suggested the approaching man's rank to some extent.

"Are you the leader of the Order?"

He shook his head while looking at me intently.

"Well… I wouldn't quite call myself the leader. The Order is traditionally governed by a council of the highest-ranking members."

I couldn't read anything from his eyes.

"However, now that all the top-ranking members have died, except for me… I suppose the term 'leader' isn't entirely inaccurate."

He spoke, holding his sword at the ready.

"Archdemon, how about you die here for the sake of humanity?"

“…You want me to die?"

The middle-aged man nodded in response to my question.

"I know that you love humanity, no, all beings, deeply and profoundly."

"That's why Epinhauser, who had been watching you the longest, died for your sake."

"Because he knew you."

"Because he knew your love, he had no choice but to do so."

"You know that with your death, humanity can achieve a great deal."

"Overcome mutual distrust."

"Overflowing despair."

"The current situation where humanity is seeking a scapegoat to overcome its despair."

"While I can't say that everything will be overcome, this phenomenon of humans seeking human scapegoats other than the Demon King due to insatiable desires for revenge will cease."

"But if you die, humanity will gain hope."

"Of course, we know that hope doesn't hold much value."

"We are not ignorant of the fact that nothing can be accomplished through futile hope."

"However, we can't live without hope either."

"You are a symbol of hatred and despair."

"Look."

The man pointed at the terrified crowd, trampling and killing each other.

"Sadly, your existence is causing despair and fear."

"…"

"No matter what you think of humans, they only see fear and despair in you."

"…"

"When you reveal yourself, you cause panic in humans due to fear and despair; when you don't, vengeful and hateful humans fall into panic."

The fact that very few people understood my intentions.

I couldn't deny it.

I am merely a symbol of hatred, despair, and pain.

My existence is nothing more than a symbol of fear for humanity, an enemy that must be eliminated.

Visible to people.

Or invisible.

The driving force behind emotions may differ, but I only drive people mad.

"You love humans, but you don't trust them."

"You probably don't think that the deep misunderstanding, which seems impossible to resolve, can be resolved in a beautiful way. Otherwise, you wouldn't have entered the temple while hiding your appearance."

"Like how our forces have dwindled as a result of us trying to handle the situation in our own way, you must have tried to handle this situation in your own way as well. Moreover, you must have come here to save those who couldn't trust you."

"The situation hasn't been completely resolved, but what happens after it is resolved is my concern."

"Sooner or later, there will be a war."

In a situation where these wounds have not yet healed, the humans insisted that they must vanquish the Demon King, the root cause of this calamity.

"Even if you don't want it, even if the Empire doesn't want it, even if the Emperor doesn't want it."

"War is inevitable, I can feel it."

"People would rather hope for the death of the Demon King than to kill the monsters roaming the continent."

"Today, you tried to save Charlotte de Gardias."

"I believe that to be a great love and understanding."

"Oh, Demon King."

"So, can you not die now?"

"Before more blood is shed."

"Before more despair and sadness consume the world."

"With your death, save humanity."

"Please."

Regardless of what stood in my way, it was clear that he admired my existence.

Regardless of my intentions, my very existence is already a disaster.

Thus, he said that if it were for the sake of humanity, I should die here and now.

I knew that a war might break out after the Gate incident was resolved.

The Gate incident is the ending of the original story.

But after that, a war will break out. A war because of me.

Here and now, if I die in front of the countless humans watching, there will be no war.

People will cheer at the news of the Demon King's death.

Starting with the Five Great Faiths, the witch hunt for scapegoats related to the Demon King and his forces will no longer continue.

It doesn't matter what I want.

In life, I bring only despair, fear, and hatred.

In death, I can save many.

So, he said to die here, before more sacrifices are made.

He asked me to die, showing respect.

"What's your name?"

At my question, the middle-aged man lowered his head.

"I cannot tell you. A vile being like me has no right to say my name to a great existence like you."

I could feel that he respected me immensely, despite our age difference.

Regardless, he stood in my way because I had to die.

"However, we are the Black Order."

"If we must commit evil to do good, then we are the ones to do it."

"We won't justify it. We have no interest in that."

"With our evil act of killing you, we only seek to perform the good of saving humanity."

A sophistry, perhaps.

But I didn't particularly want to argue.

Everyone has their own justice they believe in.

That justice is their own sophistry. The man in front of me simply stood before me because he lived for it.

"If my death means fewer people die, that's certainly true."

Yes, that could be justice.

That could be good.

I may have to die.

There may be more I can achieve in death than in life.

From the start, if I had died and disappeared, none of this would have happened.

As long as the world's malice is directed at me, the more I struggle to do something, the more it may turn into a greater tragedy and disaster that stands in my way.

But still.

"I want to say this, though."

I put more strength into the hand gripping my Alsbringer.

"I want to live."

I want to live.

Somehow, by gritting my teeth and living.

Not a life that is fulfilled in death.

Not succumbing to resignation and despair.

"I will save them, alive."

Definitely.

Alive.

Not in death.

"Whatever it is that I need to save."

I will prove that I can achieve something through life.

"Alive."

I don't want to feel relief in death.

"Alive, I want to see with my own eyes what I have saved and what remains."

Even if the path I must take in life is a thorny road of despair, I want to live.

"I will see it with my own eyes."

I want to find happiness while living.

Alive.

Though I might not be able to recover all that has been broken.

I want to mend the relationships I can, somehow.

I want to be happy.

I know it's foolish and miserable to dream of such a thing at this moment when the world has fallen into ruin and so much has been destroyed.

But I still want to be happy, I genuinely think so.

Dreaming of that can't be wrong, can it?

No, could it be wrong?

It might be wrong for a being like me to wish for such a thing.

Yet still.

I wish for it.

Upon hearing my words, the middle-aged man looked at me and nodded.

"Yes. So it is."

He aimed his sword at me, and the blade was engulfed in blue magical flames.

An unknown black energy swirled around his empty left hand.

"I will remember you."

As if he would remember how great a being I was for the rest of his life.

"If I die, will you remember me too?"

The leader of the Black Order left those words behind as he pointed his drawn sword at me.

"That much, I can do."

To the first enemy who tries to kill me not with hatred but with respect.

That much I can do, can't I?

At my words, the nameless middle-aged man smiled.

"Neither the strongest nor the most wicked nor the most ominous."

"The best Demon King."

"I pay my respects to you."

There was no more conversation after that.

CHAPTER 468

Common Sense

There is such a thing as common sense.

It is what is universally accepted among people.

However, common sense is not the truth.

Sometimes, common sense can be wrong, and there can be exceptions.

One such common sense:

It is impossible for someone with Magic Body Strengthening to stand against a Master Class.

Ellen struggled to keep herself from being trampled by the crowd while witnessing her own common sense shatter before her eyes in real-time.

An unidentified middle-aged man was swinging a menacing Aura Sword, yet Reinhardt managed to fend it off with only his Alsbringer.

-Clang!

Moreover, he was dominating.

As the swords clashed, shockwaves tore through the ground, and Reinhardt was not only blocking the Aura Sword but also repelling and overpowering it.

The Aura Sword is not simply a sharp blade.

Depending on how the magic within it is wielded, it can reach the pinnacle of sharpness or deliver tremendous impact using magical shockwaves.

A Master Class, therefore, is akin to wielding a massive blunt weapon.

And such a thing typically not only pulverizes the weapon it comes into contact with, but also shatters the arm and wrist that attempts to block it.

It has to be that way.

Even if one's physical abilities are drastically enhanced through Magic Body Strengthening, a Master Class's use of magic is far more intricate and efficient.

Thus, Reinhardt should not be able to stand against a Master Class.

However, Ellen saw that Reinhardt was not on the defensive; rather, he was pushing his opponent back.

-Groan! Grumble!

The winds from the shockwaves generated by the clashing swords even reached Ellen's face, who was a considerable distance away from the scene.

A Master Class was being pushed back by someone who could only do Magic Body Strengthening.

There could be only one reason for this impossible event.

Reinhardt was simply too strong.

Though he should not have been able to withstand the force, he was overpowering his opponent with sheer strength.

Reinhardt's immense Magic Body Strengthening, which appeared to be engulfed in blue flames, demonstrated that his magical power was immeasurable.

His magic was not delicate, so its efficiency suffered.

However, its output was overwhelming.

Lacking the finesse of a Master, Reinhardt's overwhelming power, agility, and sheer magical quantity relentlessly pushed his opponent back.

What should she do if Reinhardt was in danger?

Would she have to go help him, disregarding misunderstandings and the criticism of others?

Though she had been pondering this, there was no need for such thoughts.

Reinhardt was simply too powerful.

Moreover, Reinhardt's opponent was not just any Master Class.

-Rumble!

As the mysterious man stretched out his left hand, pitch-black flames erupted from beneath his feet, engulfing Reinhardt.

The enemy Reinhardt was facing was a monster who had reached the level of an Archmage while also being a Master Class.

From within the dark flames that could melt the earth, Reinhardt emerged unscathed and continued his fierce assault.

Amidst the lightning and black flames from the man's hands, and the extreme cold that could freeze the very air, Reinhardt relentlessly pressed his attack as if such things had no effect on him.

Ellen guessed that just as Reinhardt's physical abilities were overwhelming, his magical resistance had already surpassed the level of an ordinary person.

The crowds, being pushed back and fleeing, were astonished by the sight.

No one knew who the person trying to kill the Demon King was, but everyone could see from afar that he was incredibly skilled.

However, the Demon King was stronger.

Not only that man, but the other assailants continued to attack the Demon King relentlessly.

Despite their use of all sorts of enchantments, magic, and curses, they were unable to inflict any harm upon the Demon King's body.

The amassed enchantments proved futile against the Demon King.

-Groar! Grrrrrr!

With a mere glance, the Demon King obliterated them.

The Demon King, shrouded in blue magical energy, manipulated flames.

He even created massive explosions by igniting the infinitely condensed flames.

The crowd could only watch in terror as the Demon King, single-handedly slaughtered groups comprised of Swordmasters, Archmages, and Magic Swordsman.

The Demon King was simply too powerful.

“We're… all going to die…”

Numerous individuals trembled and collapsed, unable to move.

Who could possibly challenge such a Demon King?

Who could harm the absolute being immune to magic and Aura Blades?

The Demon King's existence was even more terrifying to those who hadn't reached the Master Class.

Even now, they wondered.

What kind of calamity would the Demon King become once he reached the Master Class?

The fear of those witnessing the Demon King, who hadn't fully matured, only grew.

Of course, not all attacks were ineffective against the Demon King.

When those who had reached the Master Class began their joint attack, there were cases where they pierced through the Demon King's flaming magical defenses and inflicted damage.

No matter how strong the Demon King was, he couldn't easily withstand the

combined assault of the Master Class.

Countless offensive spells rained down upon the Demon King, and Reinhardt was soon cornered.

-Whoosh!

“!”

Ellen's eyes widened as she saw a spear imbued with Aura pierce through Reinhardt's heart.

A critical opening.

They succeeded in inflicting a fatal wound without missing their chance.

“A-ah, no, no… no, it can't be.”

Though Ellen began to tremble and sob, the retreating crowds stared in disbelief.

The Demon King had died.

An unnatural silence descended upon the chaotic square.

However.

The Demon King grabbed the spear that pierced through his chest with his left hand.

-Whoosh!

With his heart impaled, he pulled out the spear using his full strength.

Then, the Demon King raised his hand.

-Whoooom!

In the other hand of the Demon King, who had only been wielding Alzbringer, another sword with a milky-white blade was summoned.

The Divine Sword of Purity, a sacred relic of Tu’an.

Tiamata.

-Whooosh!

A holy white light flickered around Tiamata, and the wound in the Demon King's chest began to regenerate.

“Ah… ahh… ahhh…”

Those who had anticipated the Demon King's death could only tremble in terror at the sight.

“He won't… die…”

Piercing through the tremendous barrier of magical energy was physically difficult, and magic had little effect.

Even if they managed to break through, the Demon King, who wielded the divine power of Tu’an, would instantly heal his wounds.

“The Immortal… The Demon King is immortal…”

An invulnerable barrier.

Overwhelming physical strength against the Master Class.

The relentless release of an imposing amount of magical energy with no end in sight.

And then, regeneration.

“This… this is impossible…”

With immeasurable power, the ability to borrow divine power from relics to regenerate at will, and the Sword of the War God that grew stronger with more and stronger enemies, who could possibly defeat such a Demon King?

Who, and how?

Who could slay such an absolute being?

Who could confront the seemingly immortal existence?

It wasn't just the crowd that was taken aback by the sight of a man pulling a spear from his pierced heart with his bare hands.

Reinhardt charged at the stunned middle-aged man without giving him a chance to react.

Swish!

Then, in one swift motion, he grabbed the man's white hair and slammed his head to the ground.

Thud!

With a fierce crashing sound, Reinhardt struck the man's head, which was now embedded in the ground, with his Alsbringer.

Screech!

The Aura Armor did not shatter under the Demon King's blow.

Clank!

However, if it didn't break in one hit, he would strike again.

Crack!

Three times.

Bang!

Four times.

Bang!

Five times.

Crash!

Six times.

Swish!

And on the seventh strike, the sound of something shattering echoed chillingly throughout the square.

Reinhardt had crushed a Master Class warrior clad in Aura Armor through sheer strength.

It was more fitting to say he had smashed him to death rather than impaling him.

Their leader was killed without even a chance to respond.

Quite literally, he was crushed to death.

An Archmage and a Master Class warrior.

The leader of the Black Order.

He was mercilessly and pathetically killed by the Demon King.

The Demon King, still exuding the same overwhelming power as before, stared at the remaining Master Class attackers.

Those who had stood against the Demon King until now began to slowly retreat.

It seemed as if they believed that if they couldn't kill the Demon King like this, any further attempts would be futile.

People began to despair as they watched the attackers flee.

They couldn't identify who they were.

A group of highly skilled individuals had ambushed the Demon King.

Yet, they had failed.

That simple truth alone was etched into the minds of the people.

This had happened right in the middle of the Imperial Capital.

Who on earth could stand against the seemingly immortal Demon King?

“Runnnnnnn!”

Those who had been hesitating, hoping that the Demon King might be killed, began to panic and run again at the sight of the attackers fleeing.

"Make way! Move! Move!"

Many people who ran past Ellen hit her shoulder, pushing her aside as they screamed for their lives.

Thwack!

So it was that Ellen, who had been staring blankly at Reinhardt, was jostled by the fleeing crowd and eventually fell to her knees.

The deep hood she had been wearing was knocked off in the process.

"Ah…”

"Uh…”

The fleeing people saw her.

They looked at Ellen's face and stopped in their tracks, as if they were frozen.

There were hardly any people in the Imperial Capital who didn't know Ellen's face.

Even if they hadn't seen her in person, her face was well-known due to portraits and other promotional materials.

"The Hero…?"

People stopped and stared at the dumbfounded Ellen, who was now sitting on the ground.

Ellen was suddenly engulfed by a foreboding sense of doom.

"It's the Hero!"

Someone shouted.

“The Hero?”

“Is Ellen really here?”

“The Hero?”

“The Hero is…”

Ellen felt the blood in her body turn ice cold.

Her fingertips trembled, and her lips quivered.

“The Hero has come to save us!”

Cheers began to spread.

Through the gaps between people, and in the midst of the clamor.

Ellen saw Reinhardt, who stood far away, looking at her.

"Hero! Please, please! Please defeat the Demon King!"

One of the fleeing people cried out to Ellen in desperation.

The expressions of others were no different.

A hero should be different, or so Ellen wished to believe.

"I, I am… I, I am… I am…”

I am.

What am I?

How?

Why?

Her mind shattered, Ellen could come to no thoughts or conclusions.

People helped her up as she lay on the ground.

Those fleeing implored Ellen, facing her back, to defeat the Demon King.

Some wept, cowering and trembling in prayer.

Please, defeat the Demon King.

Ellen was pushed into the square by the crowd.

Reinhardt silently watched Ellen Artorius emerge from the people.

Not knowing what to do themselves, but begging her to do something.

They pushed Ellen toward the Demon King who had committed a massacre, and then fled.

But there were those who tried to watch the scene from afar.

The Demon King and the hero.

They were far apart.

Reinhardt stared silently at Ellen.

Ellen trembled, her face drained of color.

Why?

Why in this way?

Why must they reunite in such a situation?

Reinhardt's face was expressionless.

Why?

With that look.

With a look devoid of any emotion.

Why are you looking at me like that?

"I, I am… Re, Reinhardt… I am…”

I don't want to fight.

I don't want to fight with you.

Killing.

Dying.

I don't want any of it.

Ellen swallowed those words, her lips trembling.

Reinhardt approached the trembling Ellen.

Toward Ellen, who had not summoned Lapelt or Lament.

“…Hey."

Leaping forward, Reinhardt whispered to Ellen.

"Get a grip…”

"…!"

"Will you?"

- Thump!

"Ugh…!"

Reinhardt's fist plunged into Ellen's abdomen.

- Crash!

With a single blow to her stomach, Ellen flew back and crashed into a building wall in the square.

Ignoring the crowd's horror, Reinhardt slowly walked toward Ellen Artorius, embedded in the building wall.

"Hu… ugh… ugh… ah…”

She had been hit unprepared.

"Cough! Gasp! Choke! Hack!"

Barely activating her Aura Armor just before the hit, she didn't die, but Ellen coughed up bright red blood.

"Ah… ugh…”

He didn't mean to kill her.

But his fist was far from gentle.

Ellen looked up at the approaching Reinhardt with a frightened expression.

More than the agony of her insides being torn apart.

More than the pain of coughing up blood.

Reinhardt's emotionless expression was now Ellen's greatest fear and terror.

That gaze, as if looking at an enemy, instilled immense dread in Ellen.

"Ugh… ugh… hu-ugh…”

"What will happen if people find out the hero is afraid to fight the Demon King?"

Reinhardt spoke calmly, his expression emotionless as he approached.

"You can do what I could never do."

Becoming a symbol of hope.

That was impossible for the Demon King.

Only a hero.

Only a hero can be a symbol of hope.

That's why a hero trembling in fear before the Demon King would bring only despair to everyone.

People in despair would envision a future where humanity is destroyed by the Demon King, and the world without hope would crumble.

So she must fight.

She must not refrain from fighting.

Even if it's a false hope, it must exist.

Only by believing in that false hope can people somehow cling to reality.

As long as there is a hero, it is alright for the Demon King to exist.

Someday, the hero will defeat the Demon King.

Only by believing so can this crumbling world be sustained.

"So, pull yourself together."

The Demon King gazes down at the hero, who is exhausted from fear and terror.

"Get up. If you don't want to die."

The Demon King.

Valier raises his foot towards Ellen.

-Thump!

With magical power imbued in his foot, Valier stomps down where Ellen's head was, and the building begins to crumble.

Frantically rolling to the side to avoid the blow, Ellen looks at Reinhardt.

Fear, despair, and exhaustion from terror fill Ellen's eyes.

Why?

Why you?

"I am… Rein… Reinhardt, I am…"

"Shut up."

Valier looks at Ellen with cold eyes.

"Don't call me like that."

This is not the time for a touching reunion.

Too many people are watching.

Even though they know that's why they are acting this way.

Ellen, still drained from fear and terror, gazes at Reinhardt, who looks back at her with eyes filled with enmity.

Ellen realizes.

I can't.

Charlotte can be taken away.

But never her, the fact that she is humanity's hope.

Knowing that people project their hope onto her, she must never be taken for the sake of their hope.

That harsh reality and truth.

Ellen could only see it in Reinhardt's eyes.

She felt like tears would fall at any moment.

But she couldn't cry.

A hero facing the Demon King must not cry in front of him.

Never, they must not.

The solemn-faced Demon King approaches.

"You, do what you have to do."

"…"

"I will do what I have to do."

She wanted to collapse.

She wanted to fall and cry.

Rather, she wanted to die.

But people were watching the confrontation and turning their heads away as they left.

Staggering, Ellen stands up.

And though her expression remains filled with terror,

Despite the unbearable reality before her eyes,

Just as Reinhardt bears a burden, Ellen too must shoulder one.

They cannot escape the roles of hero and Demon King.

Thus, the Demon King can take the hated princess, but never the hero.

Now, they can never be together, no matter what moment comes.

The Sword of the Moon God is held in Ellen's hand.

The Cloak of the Sun God drapes over Ellen's shoulders.

With trembling eyes, the hero stares at the Demon King.

Reinhardt.

No.

Demon King Valier approaches the hero, Ellen Artorius.

CHAPTER 469

Ellen's sword trembled as she faced the Demon King.

Her eyes, her body, and her legs were all quivering.

Clang! Crunch!

Unable to launch a proper attack, Ellen could only stagger back from the Demon King's fierce assault.

The Demon King showed no mercy.

His foot, wrapped in a violent whirl of magical power, broke through Lapelt's counterforce and roughly struck the aura armor enveloping Ellen.

Gasp!

"Ah… ugh!"

Ellen was sent flying and rolled across the ground, having been struck in the abdomen by the heavily weighted kick.

Pain.

It wasn't that severe in itself.

However, it felt as if her heart was breaking.

She knew that this fight was nothing more than a performance. Reinhardt wouldn't kill her, and she didn't want to hurt him either.

This play was necessary to show people that the hero could stand up to the Demon King.

If they hadn't met, she might not have known, but now that they had…

The Demon King was frightening, but people had to believe that the hero could face him.

That way, even if people despaired and cursed the world, they would cling to the hope and expectation that the Demon King would someday die.

Those who hated the Demon King would try to survive, hoping to someday hear the story of his death at the hands of the hero.

So, even if she didn't want to fight, she had to fight somehow.

The Demon King leaped towards Ellen, who had been thrown and rolled on the ground.

And then.

Thud!

Stamping down with his magic-infused giant leg, he crushed the ground where Ellen had just been moments ago.

Ellen had already rolled away from that spot.

She somehow managed to point her sword at the Demon King, but the tip of her blade trembled severely.

The situation spoke volumes.

Reinhardt's expression said it all.

Now.

There would never be a return to the past.

Holding hands as they walked.

Embracing each other.

Whispering to each other how precious they were and exchanging such words.

It was impossible.

Humanity's hope.

Humanity's enemy.

Their relationship was divided into such a cruel dichotomy.

That's why, regardless of his true feelings, Reinhardt attacked Ellen.

To be precise, he fought to pretend to be defeated. If the Demon King retreated from this place, people would have hope.

But Ellen couldn't wield her lament.

The Moon God's Sword, which reacted to sadness.

Ellen knew best the power of the Void Sword Lament.

The Void Sword was an absolute blade that could cut through anything. It could easily slice through the aura-covered Swordmaster's sword, as well as the toughest monster hide.

She didn't know if the Void Sword could cut through sacred artifacts.

However, if she swung it recklessly, she might not only cut the sacred artifact but also Reinhardt.

That's why Ellen couldn't carelessly swing her sword.

Because she didn't know if Reinhardt would be hurt.

Or worse, if he would die.

The Demon King gazed at the trembling hero, who couldn't do anything but slowly retreat.

"You're scared, aren't you?"

The Demon King slowly approached the hero.

"Scared that I might die, right?"

"…"

"You…"

Ellen almost bit her tongue at the Demon King's straightforward words, which accurately read her thoughts.

"Me."

Instead of his Alsbringer, the Demon King aimed his left hand, the Tiamata, at Ellen.

"Still…"

Ooooh!

A white halo began to ripple like waves in the Tiamata held by the Demon King.

Something was coming.

Ellen didn't know what it was, but she activated the aura throughout her body.

The distance was far, but the surging divine power in Tiamata gave her a very ominous feeling.

"Does this remind you of that pathetic time?"

Gritting his teeth, the Demon King's mind was filled with rage.

From a distance beyond the reach of a sword, the Demon King directed Tiamata at Ellen.

-Flash!

A storm of light.

Along with the thought that a storm of blinding light seemed to consume everything before her eyes, Ellen felt as if the intense destructive force would tear her body apart.

—---

-Growling

The release of divine power that had transformed into energy solely focused on strength, devoid of any intention.

The force of that power had clawed the grand plaza, and Ellen barely stood up from the gap between the collapsed buildings.

"Huff… huff…”

Thanks to the protection of Lapelt and the aura armor, she hadn't suffered severe injuries.

However, without that protection, Ellen would have died from the previous attack.

The Demon King was watching Ellen rise from the wreckage of the building, about a hundred meters away.

Ellen could clearly feel the Demon King's anger.

Did he feel ignored and therefore become angry?

No, that wasn't it.

It's simply because you're precious to me.

I don't want to point my sword at you.

Ellen wanted to scream that.

But, could that be true?

Maybe I’m just afraid of hurting you.

What's the difference between saying she can't give her all because he might die, and ignoring Reinhardt?

The reason she didn't have the confidence to properly play out this drama was the

fear that Reinhardt wouldn't be able to withstand her attack.

That's why Reinhardt was angry.

Didn't she know that he was no longer the same novice from back then?

Did she think he was still that kind of person because he had always been on the receiving end?

Ellen clenched her teeth.

Reinhardt was no longer the Reinhardt of the past.

Although he hadn't opened the door to the Master Class, he had become a monster capable of confronting a Master Class without doing so.

Since she had always been ahead of Reinhardt, she thought it was only natural that she still was.

She couldn't deny that she felt that way about herself.

Ellen admitted her arrogance.

Reinhardt had become strong.

Perhaps, even stronger than her.

Ellen gripped Lament with both hands.

Now, she had to perform the drama.

She had to show the people the drama of defeating the Demon King after a fierce struggle.

A narrow margin.

A dangerous drama where a single mistake could kill them both.

But upon reflection, was it really that difficult?

Was there any reason to be so tense, fearful, and trembling with terror?

Her heart still ached and was full of pain, but Ellen had to admit it.

It wasn't difficult.

If she thought about it.

They had crossed swords countless times.

Every day, until they went to bed.

At first, Reinhardt, who could only crawl, wasn't even worth facing. But then she began teaching him swordsmanship.

At some point, he became skilled enough for her to hold back slightly.

Every day.

Every day, they clashed their swords.

At some point, Reinhardt's skill improved to the point where she couldn't afford not to take him seriously.

So Ellen, too, struggled until her breath caught in her throat.

Every day.

Every moment.

They had stubbornly faced each other.

That's why they knew each other's swordsmanship better than anyone else in this world.

That's why it should be easy.

It had to be done with ease.

Ellen pointed the Void Sword she held tightly in both hands at the Demon King.

The trembling, it finally disappeared.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the Void Sword could not cut through sacred artifacts.

A blade that could cut through anything was unable to sever sacred artifacts.

However, it had the same effect of neutralizing any other defenses.

The Demon King could block the Void Sword Lament, but only with a sacred artifact. He couldn't block attacks aimed at his body.

No matter how strong his Magic Body Strengthening, or even if he could use Aura Armor.

In front of the Void Sword, it was all as good as nothing.

Clang! Clash!

The people watched in fear as the hero, who had been unable to act out of dread, relentlessly pursued the Demon King once she started attacking properly.

It was unclear why she had been so frightened, but now was what mattered.

Certainly, the Demon King, who had withstood the combined attacks of other Master Classes, was now only able to defend against the hero's attacks.

However, no one knew that Ellen intentionally did not inflict a fatal blow on the Demon King, and the Demon King also feigned a desperate retreat.

Reinhardt's swordsmanship was originally Ellen's, and Ellen's swordsmanship was originally that of the hero, Ragan Artorius.

Therefore, Ellen had no choice but to know everything about Reinhardt's swordsmanship, and due to the difference in talent and aptitude, Reinhardt's swordsmanship could only be an inferior version of Ellen's.

The Demon King fought by exchanging sacred artifacts.

He would use Alsbringer, then unsummon it, and if necessary, summon Tiamata to fight.

At times, he would summon artifacts in both hands and swing them like dual swords, but to Ellen, this seemed like an act of faith in his outstanding physical abilities, without any tricks.

Reinhardt's swordsmanship was essentially a style of fighting with a single sword, that is, it did not deviate from Ellen's swordsmanship.

There was no one to teach him the unique dual swordsmanship, and even if he had two sacred artifacts, he could not abandon the well-established foundation he had already built for using dual swords.

So, Ellen could still read the Demon King's sword.

Of course.

'It's possible he's fighting so that I can read him.'

This was nothing more than a performance for show.

That's why he might have deliberately attacked in a way that was easy for Ellen to read and parry.

The two had been bitterly crossing swords with each other for a very long time.

Thus, it was only natural that Reinhardt could read Ellen's sword just as Ellen could read Reinhardt's.

Of course, it wasn't just swords clashing in this performance.

-Screech!

"Ugh… Huk!"

Whenever an opening appeared, the Demon King would genuinely strike Ellen's head with the flat of his sword or aim for her vital points, sometimes succeeding in his attacks.

-Splash! Crash!

Ellen deflected Reinhardt's sword with her Lament and then landed physical blows

on the Demon King with her left fist or a kick.

It was a fierce battle that no one could think of as a performance.

The scale of the fight was different from the old days in the temple when they didn't even know how to use Magic Body Strengthening.

Fountains were shattered, the ground crumbled, and a few buildings collapsed as they were sent flying in the brutal and desperate battle.

No one could intervene in the battle between the hero and the Demon King.

Not knowing if they would only hinder, the crowd, as well as the knights and mages of the empire, had no choice but to hold their breath and watch the spectacle unfold.

Though it was a play, to those unaware of the truth, it appeared as if the Demon King and the hero were fighting for their lives.

And in reality, they were indeed risking their lives.

It was clear that if one made a mistake, the other would die.

Both the Demon King and the hero.

Wounded and battered, they aimed their swords at each other.

The grand square, meant for the execution of the princess, had become almost indistinguishable from ruins due to the battle between the Demon King and the hero.

How much longer?

How long would they have to display this mutual harm to the people?

Biting her lips hard enough to taste blood, Ellen thought as she charged at the Demon King.

She aimed Lament at Reinhardt's heart.

Showing him the sword, she knew that as she swiped Lament with Alsbringer, Reinhardt would attack with his left fist, a kick, or twisting his body and striking

with his elbow.

If she managed to push him back, she would use Aura Armor to block the attack and prepare a counterstrike.

It was an attack made possible because they could read each other.

So, trusting that he would deflect her thrusting sword as expected, she lunged.

But instead of deflecting Alsbringer, Reinhardt surprisingly stabbed toward Ellen.

-Whoosh!

-Clang!

"!!!!"

Ellen's eyes widened as she saw her sword, as if lying, pierce through Reinhardt's chest.

Naturally, Alsbringer, aiming at Ellen's chest protected by Aura Armor, could only be deflected.

He had allowed the attack on purpose.

Ellen's complexion turned pale, not having expected him to allow this attack.

"Gh… uh…"

The Demon King retreated a few steps.

Slowly backing away from the stunned Ellen, who had let go of her sword in shock, the Demon King pulled Lament from his heart.

-Clatter!

Lament fell to the ground without grace, and Reinhardt continued to back away slowly.

"I, I… I…"

Reinhardt glared at Ellen, who was trying to say something.

As if to tell her not to say a word.

As if to say, hadn't she seen that he could heal himself with Tiamata?

The Demon King, who spoke only with his eyes, held his impaled chest and retreated.

The Demon King raised one hand to the sky.

As if it were a signal,

A crack appeared in the air, revealing someone's presence.

Seeing the sudden appearance of this person, Ellen couldn't help but widen her eyes.

Harriet de Saint Owan.

Having torn through space, Harriet appeared and supported the staggering Reinhardt.

Harriet and Ellen's gazes met for a moment.

Harriet and Ellen both had much to say to each other, but knowing they shouldn't, said nothing.

Ellen could only blankly watch Harriet escape with the wounded Demon King through instant spatial teleportation.

Silence crept into the grand square.

Most had fled from the scene where the hero and the Demon King had fought just moments ago.

However, there were undoubtedly those who had watched the spectacle unfold.

At first, the hero seemed to be consumed by fear, but as she made up her mind to confront the Demon King, she continued to press on, eventually landing a fatal blow.

The Demon King chose to flee rather than continue fighting and healing his wounds.

He must have felt threatened to have fled.

Soon, it became clear that the Demon King was not immortal.

“The… The Demon King…”

"The Demon King has fled…”

"The hero has… driven the Demon King away…”

Everyone knew that the Demon King had not been killed. They were aware that he would recover through the power of healing. However, the fact remained that the Demon King, along with his minions, had fled after deeming himself no match for the hero.

"The Demon King has escaped!"

"The hero has driven the Demon King away!"

Boldly, a few people who had been watching the fierce battle from a distance in the square began to shout. It had turned out just as Reinhardt had wanted. The Demon King, who had been showcasing an almost immortal aspect in the middle of the square, had been defeated by Ellen Artorius's hand, and it had been done so.

The hero had shown everyone that she could indeed stand up to the Demon King, just as they had hoped.

However, Ellen herself was filled with fear due to the sensation of her sword thrusting into Reinhardt's heart. Many civilians had lost their lives, the princess had not been executed, and the terrifying event of the Demon King's appearance had occurred.

But even so, the Demon King had been driven away by the hero. She hadn't killed him, but she might have been able to.

Ellen was trembling with fear.

"The hero has vanquished the Demon King!"

The people praised the hero. The deeper the despair, the greater the hope. But the

more people projected hope onto her, the more Ellen felt engulfed by her own growing despair.

CHAPTER 470

At the entrance of the Crineto Forest in the southern region of the Imperial Capital.

All of us, including myself, had gathered at the prearranged rendezvous point.

-Groan

"Are you alright?"

"I'm not exactly fine, but… I can endure this much…"

As Harriet wiped the blood from the corner of my mouth, she asked cautiously.

"Still, having your heart pierced twice in a single day. There's nothing good about having such experiences."

It hurt like hell.

Being impaled by a spear was an unexpected event, but the second time my heart was pierced by Lament, it was intentional. I knew it would happen.

I swear.

Knowing it was coming made it even more frightening and painful.

Of course, I've been healed by Tiamata's divine power now, but the memory of the pain does not easily fade.

Above all else,

I couldn't forget Ellen's shocked expression after she had stabbed me.

It was bound to become a trauma.

Not only for stabbing me but also for the hellish feelings today's experience would bring to Ellen. I couldn't help but be uneasy knowing this.

I had considered the possibility that Ellen might be at the scene, but I hadn't anticipated that the crowd would force her to fight against her will.

Harriet deactivated the spatial teleportation barrier and extracted me at the right timing according to the signal.

The leader of the Black Order was dead, and the remnants had retreated.

I couldn't be sure what they would try to do to me next.

The Knights periodically cleared the monsters from the gates near the Imperial Capital, so there were no monsters nearby. Of course, that wasn't foolproof, and there were instances when monsters appeared in the refugee camp on the Imperial Capital.

At the moment, there were no monsters visible within the vicinity of the forest.

Despite many unexpected events, I ultimately achieved my desired goal.

I succeeded in rescuing Sarkegaar, Lucinil, and Charlotte.

Although I had to treat Ellen harshly unintentionally.

It couldn't be helped.

That's what I think.

At first, Charlotte was unconscious.

But now, she was awake.

Charlotte, unaware of what had happened to her, was in a state of shock.

Charlotte, with her black hair and red eyes.

Would she be unable to return to her original form in this state?

"Your Highness…”

Sarkegaar, with a trembling voice, spoke to me.

"I'm sorry. I found you too late. I had too many things to do… No, never mind. I'm sorry. I was too late."

"No, Your Highness. Just seeing you safe like this… The gods… The gods…"

I quietly embraced Sarkegaar as he sobbed miserably.

He appeared somewhat terrifying in his true Dreadfiend form, but what did it matter?

I was grateful that Sarkegaar was safe.

After the embrace, I also quietly hugged Lucinil.

"I'm sorry, my Lord. I was late…"

Lucinil laughed faintly and hugged me back.

"No, not really? Thanks to your warning, both this gentleman and I fared quite well. We were treated like distinguished guests. We even heard about what might happen at the execution ceremony today."

As Lucinil hugged my neck, she patted my back.

Finally, I stood before Charlotte, who was still in shock.

"Um…"

What should I say to start?

Just as Charlotte was in shock, I couldn't find the right words to begin either.

"I did this because I thought it was necessary, but…"

"…"

In front of Charlotte, who had no idea what was happening, I finally sighed.

"From now on, you must go with me… um… first of all, I'm sorry for everything so far."

As I apologized, Charlotte trembled her lips.

"I don't know if you still hate me… but I couldn't leave you alone."

I didn't know what Charlotte was thinking.

However, I had clearly lied a lot and deceived Charlotte.

Even now, Sarkegaar, the enemy of Charlotte's mother, stands beside us.

She may not be able to forgive me.

I didn't know what Charlotte had done wrong to me, but she smiled at me weakly.

Thud

Charlotte suddenly collapsed, falling to her knees.

And then, she bowed her head.

With her head almost touching the ground, she knelt before me, her head lowered.

"Ugh… uh… ugh… ugh… ugh! Sob!"

Charlotte cried out, as if screaming.

"No, no, why are you crying… like that…"

Was she sorry to me?

Just like I felt sorry for everyone.

Had Charlotte felt guilty towards me all this time?

Me, Ellen, Charlotte.

Why did we all end up feeling guilty toward each other?

Why did we all get stuck with the idea that everything was our fault?

"Sob! Hic! Ugh! Oof… oof… oof…”

Guilt and remorse.

Charlotte made an animal-like sobbing sound, like a retching noise.

"Uh, uh… uh… sorry… ah, sorry… sorry… sorry… I, I… did wrong…”

I knelt down in front of Charlotte, who was crying and bowing her head.

"I made a lot of mistakes too."

"No, no! No! I… I didn't trust you! It's all my fault… all, everything, everything is my fault… because of me…”

I could only pat Charlotte's back as she cried like a small animal for a long time.

—---

Lucinil, Sarkegaar, and Charlotte.

I managed to bring them all back to the Edina Archipelago.

Thanks to my warning, Lucinil and Sarkegaar were neither treated harshly nor tortured.

Not that nothing happened.

The Black Order attacked me, I killed their leader, and I even had to fight Ellen who was there.

Many civilians were hurt.

However, in the end, I managed to safely bring the three of them back.

Charlotte didn't hate me; she felt guilty.

Who was the cause of all this?

It seemed inevitable that the Gate incident would happen with our emotions and my

lies intertwined.

Everyone seemed to think that all of this was their own responsibility.

The royal city of Lazak.

I felt the need to be alone with Charlotte for a while.

It was obvious that Charlotte was too weak, and her condition wasn't good.

Charlotte, who had stopped crying almost like a seizure, hung her head low.

She seemed to feel guilty even when making eye contact with me.

"It's all in the past."

"…"

"Let's end it with each of us having wronged each other, that's all."

"…"

But I couldn't erase Charlotte's guilt towards me with those words.

"I… I can't. I… I don't deserve… your help. Not even a little… don't help me this much… I betrayed you. I didn't trust you. I… didn't try to understand you…"

It seemed that she thought it would be better to die at the hands of a monster in some distant wilderness.

"People died because of me… All of them… It's my fault…"

Charlotte's guilt had turned into self-loathing.

I grabbed Charlotte's cheeks as she hung her head and repeated those self-deprecating words, forcing her to look into my eyes.

Upon meeting my gaze, Charlotte, with eyes like those of a demon, couldn't bear it and looked down before finally closing her eyes completely.

"Do you remember what I told you before?"

"…"

"If you're like this, what do you think I become?"

Back when she wondered if it would be better to die since the soul of the Demon King resided within her, I spoke to her with a sorrowful heart.

How do you think I feel when you don't cherish your own life and keep repeating these self-deprecating thoughts?

"If you're like this, what does it make of me who risked my life to escape the Demon King's castle, who killed my father's soul to preserve your identity? I had to fight the Black Order and even Ellen to bring you here. If you're like this… what does it make of me who brought you all the way here?"

"…"

At my words, Charlotte reluctantly opened her eyes and looked at me.

Tears filled her eyes.

Seeing those tears, born of guilt, was painful for me.

"Live for me, at least. If you're sorry, work as much as you feel sorry for me."

"…Work?"

"Yeah, to be honest, I brought you here not just to save you, but also… um…"

I thought this might be better.

She seemed unable to accept living with me because of her guilt and sense of sin.

She seemed unable to accept the peace this environment provided her.

"I brought you here to work."

Like how Eleris destroyed the warp gates to lessen her guilt and sense of sin,

Charlotte needed something to do, to focus on, so she could push those feelings aside.

And, in reality, I needed Charlotte here for that reason.

"There's a lot you need to do."

"Me…? What can I do…?"

"Anyway, if you're sorry to me, if you feel guilty towards people, work. Work to repay them."

I'll accept the debt.

Repay the debt for saving your life three times.

If saying this could give Charlotte even a bit of determination, then it's better this way.

"I'm… like this… how can I… what can I do…?"

Her words, questioning what she could do in her demon-like form, made me chuckle despite the situation.

"No, you're amazing."

I gently brushed Charlotte's blackened hair.

I shouldn't say this, but…

"You have an even more impressive visual than me."

"…?"

Honestly, it was true that Charlotte looked more like a Demon King than I did.

No one would dare complain about a broken dish or cup to a Demon King representative who looked like this.

I pinched Charlotte's cheeks, still bewildered by my claim that I didn't save her but

brought her here to work.

"…!"

"So, from now on, eat well and take care of yourself. Exercise, too. Got it?"

"…"

"You have to do that if you want to do your job properly, right?"

Charlotte looked up at me with her cheeks pinched.

"Answer me quickly."

As I released her cheeks, Charlotte lowered her head with a blank expression.

"…Yes."

Knowing why I spoke like this, Charlotte cried again.

I told her that I would get angry if she kept crying, so she tried to hold back her tears while also holding her breath, gasping for air. It seemed like she might pass out from not breathing properly.

I had no choice but to gently pat her back.

CHAPTER 471

Night had fallen.

I considered watching over Charlotte until she fell asleep, but I thought it would be better not to.

The more I cared for her, the deeper she seemed to sink into guilt. So, not watching over her seemed better for her.

And I couldn't talk to Charlotte forever.

I headed to the highest tower of the castle with Sarkegaar and Lucinil.

There was no better place to look down upon the landscape of Lazak.

Sarkegaar appeared as he usually did when he visited me in the past - in the form of a graceful female maid.

Did he think I found his demon form burdensome?

"Is this… Your Highness… No, the new Darklands that you have rebuilt?"

"In a sense."

Although not as bright as the Imperial Capital, the streets of Lazak were lit by lanterns, and the refugee residential areas were patrolled by guards holding torches.

From the highest point of the castle, which was built on a high plateau, I could see not only the distant sea but also the vast lands and the horizon beyond.

The expanding city districts and the vast farmland were visible.

It was an incredible sight.

What Sarkegaar had wanted was a land solely for demons, where only demons lived.

But I chose to integrate with humans and continued to rescue the demons and humans on the continent.

Although it wasn't entirely the way Sarkegaar had hoped, I managed to establish my own kingdom on the land that had avoided disaster.

Of course, it was a kingdom achieved through plunder.

"I never thought… I would see such a sight before I die…" Sarkegaar confessed, overwhelmed as he looked at the harbor, the wide refugee residential area, and the farmlands.

From the open rooftop of the tower, Sarkegaar silently turned in place, taking in the view.

It was as if he could keep doing that forever, looking around once, then again, and again.

He seemed like a child seeing an incredibly fascinating sight for the first time.

"Your Highness… I can die now. Even if I die… I will bless your new world and be happy… Anytime…"

Sarkegaar smiled innocently as he cried, like a child.

"Why are you thinking about dying? With so many things to do, it might have been better when we had no kingdom."

"Whatever it is, I will gladly die under the weight of the work. Just give me any command."

Sarkegaar gently lifted the hem of his skirt with both hands and bowed his head before me.

"The great, unique, and sublime."

"The absolute ruler of Darklands, lord of all demons, and humans."

"The immortal Demon King."

"I, Sarkegaar, will obey your command at any time."

Sarkegaar looked at me and smiled.

It was the always wicked and sinister smile of Sarkegaar.

But with tears in his eyes, and a happier expression than ever before, he still appeared in the guise of a false human woman.

At that moment, he seemed the embodiment of happiness.

At first, I was honestly afraid.

I thought I might have to get rid of Sarkegaar someday.

And at some point, I felt guilty for not being able to fulfill Sarkegaar's wishes.

But as my ambitions failed, I had to do what I didn't want to do.

In the end, I became the ruler of Darklands.

Therefore.

"Well done."

I embraced Sarkegaar.

"My most loyal servant."

I expressed my sincere feelings that I had been harboring until now.

—---

Sarkegaar went down to the tower, saying that he wanted to see my Darkland more closely with his own eyes.

Was it that good?

I thought Sarkegaar would be pleased, but I was slightly taken aback because I didn't think it would be to that extent.

"You've accomplished so much in just two years."

At Lucinil's words, I gave a bitter smile. Sarkegaar was moved by the reconstruction of Darkland, but Lucinil seemed purely amazed that such a thing was possible in just two years.

Sarkegaar, Epinhauser, Loyar, and Lucinil.

These four were the ones who confronted the knights of Saviolin Turner and Shanafel when I escaped from the temple.

Loyar and Professor Epinhauser died, and it took quite some time before I could recover the other two.

"It must have been tough… during that time."

"No, really, it was fine."

My warning that killing Lucinil and Sarkegaar would lead to a permanent hostile relationship.

I wonder if the empire really didn't treat Sarkegaar and Lucinil recklessly because of that.

"Archdemon. Even if I went through a hard time for just two years, how much would that occupy in my life?"

Lucinil says that since she has lived such a long time, even if she was suffering, it wouldn't have had such a significant meaning.

Still, the fact that Lucinil risked danger for me didn't change.

Lucinil gazed quietly at the city lights.

"You know, Valier, I find this more fascinating."

“…What is it?"

"This neighborhood, you and I came here together."

"That's right."

I once came to Edina Archipelago with Lucinil to meet Airi.

Lucinil must have known that the scenery of Edina Archipelago in that winter was very different from now.

"What has changed so much in just two years?"

Not only there was the super-large cathedral that didn't exist two years ago, but the scale of the city itself has expanded incomparably.

"Why does the time of mortals flow so quickly?"

It had only been two years, but this scenery had come into view. Lucinil seemed to find it fascinating.

"It's so cute and lovely."

Lucinil said, covering her mouth and laughing.

"But that's why it's sadder."

In the lives of mortals, there is an end called death. Therefore, Lucinil seemed to feel sadness at the same time as the brilliance.

"Why did you help me, Lord?"

“…Huh?"

At my question, Lucinil tilted her head.

Lucinil helped me.

It was not unreasonable to see her as second only to Eleris on the Council. She even risked her life for me.

I couldn't tell if Lucinil had a reason to do so. I only heard that she received some help from Eleris and repaid the debt.

Lucinil looked at me.

"When my life was reaching its limit, it was Eleris who helped me become a vampire."

"Ah…"

I thought I might not know such a thing, but it was Eleris who helped Lucinil when the physical life of Homunculus was at its limit.

"So, I was originally from the Tuesday Clan. Of course, I made a promise. I had no intention of leading a clan myself. I was told I could be turned into a vampire, but I wouldn't be looked after. That's why the Lord of Wednesday, who was close to Eleris, took me in."

"And then you ended up becoming the Lord of Wednesday?"

"The previous Lord of Wednesday didn't have a clan either. I was the only one left to inherit it."

Lucinil stretches.

"To be honest, I helped you with the thought of repaying my debt of life… But, well? Actually, I'm the type to do anything diligently."

That statement somehow made me chuckle.

"Being an immortal inevitably leads to laziness. Then, when that laziness turns into boredom and even that becomes tiresome, one gives up on life. I told you before, didn't I? Most Vampire Lords give up on life voluntarily."

"Yes, you did."

"So, even though I don't have much to do, when I decide to do something, I do it diligently. Helping you was in that context."

She risked her life to help me diligently.

That sounded a bit strange.

"Don't overthink it. Just like Antirianus is very strange, I am also very strange. You can think of it that way."

"That kind of strangeness is too convenient for me."

"Is it?"

Of course, Antirianus' strangeness is also inconvenient, but it's convenient for me all the same.

"I don't work hard for just anyone, especially not for those I dislike or those who are insignificant."

Lucinil stretches out again, taking a few deep breaths.

"You're quite pretty, cute, and unique. It seems that us immortals inevitably find someone like you adorable when we grow too old."

"We've grown too old, and now we know too well what can and cannot be achieved."

"Even if we didn't experience it ourselves, we have lived through the history recorded in books."

"Beings who dream too big."

"We know that it's fleeting, that it's impossible, and that it's overwhelmingly difficult."

"Would we mock those who dream such dreams, thinking that they could never be realized?"

"Actually, no."

"We have seen many failures, but we have also witnessed a few successes."

"Even if a hundred or a thousand fail, we have seen the one who succeeds. We have seen the egg that breaks the rock several times. However, the number of broken eggs is countless, and the number of eggs that broke the rock is only a handful even in such a long time."

"We have seen countless people fail and die while attempting something that was absolutely impossible, and then someone succeeds."

"So, I don't mock those impossible attempts."

"I pity those who fail."

"And I think those who succeed are amazing."

"Us immortals feel pity, compassion, and sympathy for beings like you."

"So, I guess I want to do something for you."

"Do you understand, Archdemon?"

"So, I don't want your story to be remembered as a sad one. Instead of watching from the sidelines of history as I always have, this time I want to be by your side and help create that story."

"So, the help Eleris gave me isn't such an important story now."

I will make sure it doesn't turn into a sad story.

Antirianus said he was fine with me dying miserably or succeeding.

While I couldn't say Lucinil was the opposite, she seemed to care about me.

She would help ensure my story doesn't end in tragedy.

It wasn't just the words saying they'd do anything for me, but something about the specifics of that statement resonated deeply within my heart.

Lucinil stretched languidly.

"Even though it was a short time… not being able to breathe the night air outside for two years was a bit stifling."

They had been comfortable, but they certainly hadn't been living a free life.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes?"

First, she called me Archdemon, then Vallie, and then Reinhardt.

Lucinil would call me by any name.

Smiling, Lucinil looked at me.

"Thank you for gifting me the night air once again."

Does she consider it a gift?

Instead of resenting the fact that I hadn't paid attention to her for two whole years, she is grateful?

If there were only immortals like Lucinil in this world, wouldn't it be quite nice?

In exchange for saving my life, she endured two years of confinement.

And she expresses gratitude just for a single breath of the cold night air.

I shouldn't think that it's a happy moment.

It's not yet a moment when one should be grateful for anything.

"I'm the one who's grateful."

Though it was a brief sensation, I was grateful to see Sarkegaar and Lucinil, and Charlotte safe, and I was happy.

—---

After Lucinil and Sarkegaar left, I sat alone on the parapet of the tower, quietly gazing at the streets of Lazak.

I had succeeded in what I wanted.

There was unavoidable damage, but it was indeed unavoidable.

The remnants of the Black Order fled after the death of their leader.

However.

I looked down at the vast expanse below me.

It was an indescribable feeling.

There were good things, but there were also terrible things.

I had been cruel to Ellen.

I thought it was the best choice in that situation. And even if that situation arose again, I believe I would do the same.

Ellen must be suffering.

It wasn't a situation where we could have a normal conversation.

Her tear-filled eyes, filled with fear, sorrow, and dread, looking up at me, were unforgettable.

That gaze.

The trembling tip of her sword.

The lips that held countless words for me but couldn't open.

All of these were painfully etched into my mind.

"…"

She must have been suffering as much as I was, if not more.

I had created more reasons for her to suffer.

I had inflicted wounds.

And the experience of physically hurting me must have shocked her even more.

Although I had to do it, it's certain that Ellen is in pain.

I wanted to say sorry.

But will there be a day for us to do that?

I don't think such a day will come.

I stared at the streetlights below.

Ellen and I live in different worlds.

I built a society of demons and humans here.

Ellen must become the single thread of hope amidst humanity's hate, fear, and anger, and unite them.

Right now, Ellen is more important than the Emperor.

That's why Ellen and I live in different worlds.

The best thing for both of us is to live like this, without knowing where the other is.

If we meet, we must fight, even if it's forced. And we must display that fight to the people.

We are enemies.

The hero must be stronger than the Demon King, and people must believe so.

The Demon King cannot attack the Empire and humanity out of fear of the hero, and people must believe that someday the hero will defeat the Demon King.

That's why I deliberately allowed Ellen to inflict a fatal wound on me.

But I wonder.

That fight was necessary, and I had deliberately pretended to lose.

Truly coldly.

Without emotions.

Today, I learned what the outcome would be if I genuinely fought against Ellen.

"…"

If I were to sincerely fight against Ellen Artorius.

If such a day ever comes.

I realized the objective truth that, without a doubt, I would be defeated.

It was through today's unintended fight that I came to understand this truth.

CHAPTER 472

The state of Lament, as if projecting the universe of the night, demonstrated an absolute cutting power.

Even if I were to become a Master Class who can use Aura Armor, it wouldn't change a thing.

It can be defended against by using a sacred relic, but that's it.

Firstly, Lament's attack power was extraordinary, but that's not the essential problem.

The biggest issue was that my swordsmanship originated from Ellen.

In the temple, and later from Saviolin Turner, I learned swordsmanship, but the root of my skills lies with Ellen.

I learned everything from swordsmanship to physical combat and suppression techniques from Ellen.

I learned the sword from Ellen, who possessed a level of talent incomparable to mine. Thus, in terms of swordsmanship, Ellen is my overwhelmingly superior counterpart.

We have clashed our swords innumerable times over a long period.

Thus, Ellen knew how I understand and use my swordsmanship, what my habits were, and which sword techniques I primarily use.

To be precise, Ellen knew me better than I knew myself.

So, in today's staged duel, we were able to perform such an extreme battle without seriously injuring each other because Ellen read all of my sword moves.

Of course, in the end, I purposely allowed her to stab me in the chest in an action close to suicide, but naturally, that was beyond Ellen's anticipation.

That's why, today's fight with Ellen – while it plunged me into a miserable state personally – allowed me to reconfirm a fact I had somewhat guessed.

I am still weaker than Ellen.

Even without the absolute offensive power of Lament, I wouldn't be able to defeat Ellen.

Ellen's swordsmanship is specialized for opponents stronger than herself. So even if my physical abilities were stronger than Ellen's, using a sword that only relied on my ‘Master Class’ strength to suppress her wouldn't work.

The Demon King fled because he was weaker than the Hero.

We staged a situation to make people believe that.

However, in reality, it wasn't much different. Even without the two sacred relics, Ellen could defeat me.

If Ellen, armed with Lament and Lapelt, sincerely tried to kill me, I would certainly die.

Ellen knew me all too well.

Like the saying "a pupil surpasses the master," as a disciple, I might be able to surpass Ellen, my teacher, but that only happened in certain worlds.

The talent of my teacher far surpassed mine.

There's no way an inferior disciple like me could surpass Ellen.

She has been watching over everything I've done.

That's why I can't defeat Ellen.

"…”

I gaze at the darkness of the street and the torches driving it away, even if just a little.

Someday.

There might come a moment when Ellen and I have to fight each other in earnest.

My defeat would be almost certain.

I don't know in what situation or how we would try to kill each other.

But if Ellen sincerely tries to kill me, I will lose, and that will result in my death.

I don't want to kill Ellen.

I don't want to die either.

In that case.

I must become an existence that can defeat Ellen.

Moreover, I don't want to use Alsbringer in the final battle to destroy the last gate.

I don't want to use Alsbringer by offering my life as a sacrifice.

I don't want to die in a fight with Ellen that might happen someday.

To do so, I must become stronger.

I must find that way.

I must find it.

—---

Ellen sat blankly on her bed in the temple's dormitory room.

"Take a few days to rest. With everything that happened today… there're no urgent matters to attend to."

Even though Bertus' suggestion wasn't an order, Ellen was in no condition to do anything at the moment.

The Demon King appeared in the Imperial Capital, was attacked by those suspected to be the secret society, the Black Order, and defeated them, and then Ellen repelled

the Demon King.

As always, stories would beget stories, and rumors would give birth to rumors.

The initial story of the hesitant hero would fade, replaced by the tale of a great hero who saved the people in the face of the Demon King's attack when all hope seemed lost.

Ellen was indifferent to such things.

Today, Ellen realized various truths.

Among them, the most painful truth was singular.

There would never be a future where Ellen would be together with Reinhardt.

It was not a matter of forgiveness.

Like Reinhardt had duties to fulfill, Ellen had tasks to complete as well.

Not a matter of emotions but of necessity, Ellen had to live as an enemy of the Demon King.

That's why Ellen realized that there would be no chance of recovery in this relationship.

Above all, those cold eyes.

The relentless actions of Reinhardt, who attacked without hesitation.

The frosty gaze and expression, devoid of any emotion, had brought Ellen sadness, despair, and fear.

Unlike Ellen, who couldn't control the trembling from the emotions, Reinhardt's ironclad expression and unwavering actions were terrifying.

Ellen didn't deny that it had to be done.

Ellen fully understood that Reinhardt had to act this way.

But it hurt too much.

The ruthless violence of the unyielding grip was just as painful as the physical agony, not fearing to hurt Ellen.

Even towards the violence inflicted upon himself, there was no mercy.

After choosing to allow her to pierce his heart without hesitation, he feigned defeat and fled.

As he hadn't feared harming Ellen, he hadn't feared harming himself either.

Ellen looked at her right hand.

Countless times had something been cut down by this hand.

However, the eerie sensation today had left Ellen with no choice but to be terrified.

Too easily.

Too simply had the sensation of Lament pierced through Reinhardt's heart, instilling fear in Ellen.

Ellen had almost killed Reinhardt.

Because of that chilling sensation, Ellen's right hand trembled violently as if afflicted with convulsions.

No matter if Reinhardt had deliberately allowed the attack, Ellen had almost killed him.

Ellen buried her face between her knees, shaking silently.

"Ugh… Sob…”

Would there be more of this in the future?

Like today, when Ellen had been forced by the people to fight Reinhardt.

Would they one day have to fight to the death, driven by the demands of others?

Ellen didn't want to prepare or resolve for such a thing.

She feared dying and killing him was even more unthinkable.

But today, despite not wanting to fight, Ellen had been forced by the people to stand before the Demon King.

And Reinhardt had cornered Ellen, saying that he too had to fight.

It seemed Reinhardt had already accepted that fate.

Reinhardt had grown stronger.

Ellen didn't know about other things.

But from that cold expression.

From that stern gaze, Ellen felt it.

Reinhardt's heart had become too strong.

To Ellen, that was utterly sad.

And frightening.

Once upon a time.

During the early days of the Gate Incident.

"Ellen."

“…Mom?"

There had been a time when her mother had suddenly appeared.

On a day when Ellen felt so exhausted that she thought she might collapse and die.

Her mother, who had appeared out of the blue, had said:

"Shall we return to our hometown?"

"Return…?"

"If you want to forget about the world and return to our hometown, let's do so."

Ellen found it hard to accept her mother's words.

She didn't know what kind of place her hometown was or who her family members and the villagers were.

"My daughter, from now on, there will only be difficult times."

"There will be pain and sadness that's hard to endure."

"It will torment you, hurt you, and might even kill you."

"So."

"Think of this as your last chance, my daughter."

"If everything becomes too hard to bear."

"Before the future, which will only become more and more difficult, swallows you up."

"You can leave all the pain and sadness behind."

"Keep the things that haven't happened as things that haven't happened."

"Without even having to know what you have yet to experience."

"Then you'll distance yourself from all the sorrow and pain, eventually forget them, and find peace."

"You'll be able to forget all the responsibilities, guilt, and sadness."

"So, shall we return to our hometown together, now?"

Ellen didn't understand what her mother was saying.

Her mother's words were so unfamiliar and mysterious that Ellen felt like she was

encountering some absolute being for the first time.

If she wanted to turn away from all of this and leave, she should do so.

Ellen didn't say much to her mother.

Her mother asked if she would turn away from this.

Why was she acting so indifferent to everything in the world?

Who were they, really?

Ellen didn't ask anything.

She just shook her head.

"No, I can't."

"…"

"Because it's my responsibility. I can't."

Her mother's expression remained gentle.

"It's not right."

"All of this happened because of me, and I made the situation like this."

"I can't just abandon people and forget about them. I can't."

"I can't go. I can't do it."

"I believe."

"There's something I must do, something I have to take responsibility for."

"I don't know how to do it, but there's someone I need to meet again."

"I don't know what I'll do when I meet them, but… there's someone I have to see."

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"I can't go."

She couldn't turn away from everything and run.

She had to save at least one more person.

Even though she knew it was impossible to fully pay for her responsibility and sins, she thought she couldn't just run away and end everything like that.

Her mother didn't say much.

"I see."

Just like before.

Like when she had draped the cloak of the sun god over Ellen's shoulders.

After lightly kissing Ellen's forehead and smiling, just like that time.

"Goodbye, my beloved daughter."

"May the blessings of the moon and sun be with you."

Leaving those words behind, she disappeared with the moonlight.

Her mother had said there would be pain too difficult to endure.

And Ellen felt that time was now approaching.

Although it had been an abstract thought, there had been such a time.

She had seen with her own eyes, felt with her body, and read from Reinhardt's expression that they had become a relationship where they had to kill each other.

She had thought she must take responsibility for something.

But if that responsibility entailed fighting for her life alongside Reinhardt, and if it meant accepting that they must kill and be killed by each other…

Neither dying nor killing was something she could bear.

Should she have fled instead?

They thought that such a choice shouldn't be made, but now the unbearable things were rapidly approaching.

Ellen was afraid.

Afraid of people, of herself, and of Reinhardt.

She was terribly afraid.

Ellen gazed at the moonlight streaming into the dormitory.

The cold, pale moonlight offered no answers to her.

—---

The next day.

Everyone had to get used to it, including me and the Council of Elders.

And…

The Four Heavenly Kings.

Airi, Liana, Harriet, and Olivia as well.

I gathered these core members for breakfast.

With Lucinil joining, the Council of Elders was now complete.

Sarkegaar was also included in the Council.

In a way, Sarkegaar had helped me since I had nothing.

So it made sense for him to be part of the Council, which could be considered the founding contributors.

The actual powers were the Four Heavenly Kings.

The contributors were the Council of Elders, that kind of feeling.

In fact, all the powers of the reconstructed Edina Archipelago version of Darkland were gathered here.

At the breakfast table, of course, the vampires did not eat.

The Council of Elders, the Four Heavenly Kings, and the Demon King.

And the newly joined member, who would become another key figure.

Charlotte.

Charlotte still couldn't raise her head.

Everyone here was my person, or even if they weren't, they were people who believed in me and came this far.

So it seemed that she couldn't even lift her head in front of those who had accomplished what she couldn't.

Charlotte was, in a way, the most demonic-looking human in this gathering.

No, strictly speaking, should she be called a half-demon?

Since the soul of an Archdemon had mixed in, Charlotte was neither fully human nor demon.

Her body no longer emitted darkness, but her hair was pitch-black, not reflecting any light, and her eyes were red.

She looked exactly like a devil.

Nevertheless, her original appearance seemed to give her an odd allure, an odd charisma.

If only her despondent demeanor could change somehow.

"Charlotte will inherit all my authority as the Demon King and take responsibility for Edina's internal affairs."

"…?"

The most surprised person at that statement was Charlotte herself.

I looked at Charlotte, who was bewildered and rolling her red eyes around, not knowing how to hide her surprise.

"Well, what else did you think I'd have the Imperial Princess do here, other than rule?"

"…"

I couldn't let her live a life where she couldn't even raise her head, consumed by guilt forever.

There's a lot that a wise ruler must do in this place, where the throat is filled with grape juice.

If she lacks confidence and self-esteem, I must forcibly raise them.

I have much to do.

Not just managing political affairs, but truly addressing the Gate incident.

There's not much time left.

I can't care for Charlotte's mental state forever, so she must stand on her own.

Too much thinking won't create anything beyond that.

People only move forward when pushed by something.

Usually, when reality catches up, there's no time to wallow in grief.

Just as I have been until now, Charlotte will also be like that.

"I can't do that," she said, "I'm not qualified, how can I possibly do that?"

I didn't give Charlotte time to argue. After conveying the most important fact, we had breakfast.

Charlotte ate half-heartedly, but when I glared at her, she reluctantly took bites.

I seemed to know how to handle Charlotte, who had been broken by her plummeting self-esteem.

Rather than gently comforting her, I simply ordered her around, and she mostly complied.

If I suggested she eat, she hesitated, but when I told her to eat, she ate reluctantly.

If I had tried to persuade Charlotte to take charge of the Edina Archipelago, she would have firmly refused, saying she wasn't qualified.

So, I just softly told her to do as she was told, and she nodded.

The once arrogant and proud princess had become someone who, in two years, would do anything I told her to.

If only it wasn't out of guilt.

Charlotte, who should have been used to giving orders, had become a person who was only used to receiving them from me.

Charlotte was not immediately involved in state affairs.

She seemed to already know that Sarkegaar was the culprit behind the kidnapping of the princess and the queen. It was inevitable since Sarkegaar and Lucinil had spent time in the palace.

However, Charlotte seemed to have no energy to spare for such things because of her guilt toward me, rather than her fear and anger toward Sarkegaar.

Her guilt was so overwhelming that she didn't even have the luxury to hate her mother's enemy.

The Council of Elders didn't usually interfere much in state affairs, so Charlotte and Sarkegaar's paths would hardly cross in the future.

Charlotte began receiving information on the overall situation of the Edina Archipelago and what she needed to know from Harriet, who could be considered a secretary.

Harriet didn't seem to have any particular emotions toward Charlotte.

Airi, however, was different.

The soul of the demon king that had entered Charlotte.

Whether she could sense it or not, Airi seemed to feel a strange fear when she looked at Charlotte.

Charlotte may be a proxy for the demon king, but she is not merely a proxy.

Charlotte is, in fact, the demon king herself.

Simultaneously human and demon king.

As both a human and a demon, she might have been more suited to rule this new Darkland than me.

Charlotte also clearly possessed, albeit not fully, the ability to control demons.

Of course, not everyone was happy with this situation.

"What can she accomplish with such little power?" Liana, who longed for the empire's destruction, asked me in a worried voice as she prepared to return to Fort Mokna.

"In the long run, she won't even compare to me."

"Tsk… I don't like it."

It was inevitable that Liana wouldn't like the situation of the imperial princess becoming the deputy ruler of Darkland.

In reality, it was Bertus who killed Duke Grantz and destroyed the revolutionary organization, but Charlotte found out about it afterward.

"Anyway, I'm leaving."

"Prepare the base relocation well. I'll make my own preparations."

"Understood."

Liana headed for Fort Mokna.

And there was the person who was most likely to dislike this situation.

"Will she manage on her own?"

Surprisingly, Olivia showed no anger or resistance to the situation.

"All we need to do is convey what we know."

Olivia looked at me with a chilling smile.

"The next time she causes trouble, don't try to protect her."

With a stern expression, Olivia looked at me.

"Even if you try to protect her then, I'll find a way to kill her."

Olivia simply gave me a clear warning of what I should be prepared for if the person who had already betrayed us caused problems again.

CHAPTER 473

Ever since arriving in Edina Archipelago, Charlotte had spent most of her time with Harriet, rather than the Demon King.

"When you're around, the child becomes restless. Just leave us alone."

"Uh… Is that so?"

"Yes, so will you let me handle things on my own?"

“…Alright."

Feeling guilty and apologetic even with a mere glance, Charlotte decided it would be best not to see the child for the time being. Despite being smaller in scale compared to the empire, there were plenty of matters to attend to in the island nation.

Although Charlotte suddenly found herself in charge of an entire nation, she felt obligated to fulfill this responsibility, as it was Reinhardt's order.

'What can someone like me do?'

Despite being lost in these thoughts, she couldn't refuse the task.

Reinhardt entrusted her with this duty because he believed in her, in his own way.

So, Charlotte spent the entire day listening to various stories from Harriet.

The population of the Edina Archipelago.

The distribution of the islands.

The current situation of each island.

The refugee transport ships arriving regularly at the main port, Lazak.

The status of stored resources and their suppliers.

Fort Mokna, which could be considered a forward base, and its imminent relocation.

And then, the demons on the streets.

Charlotte blankly stared at the scene of orcs and trolls roaming the streets of Lazak.

Initially, she wore a robe with a hood to conceal her appearance, but now she walked around without it.

In the colorful scenery of various demons, Charlotte's figure wasn't particularly peculiar.

In fact, people paid more attention to Harriet, the secretary accompanying Charlotte, than to her appearance.

"Isn't it fascinating? I can't say I'm completely used to it."

Harriet also stared blankly at the mixed crowd of humans and demons on the streets.

"Even so, my thoughts have changed significantly just by knowing that such things are possible."

Harriet took Charlotte's hand and led her up a hill in Lazak.

"Do you see that over there?"

"Farmland…?"

"Yes."

At a distance where a human figure would appear no larger than a finger, a colossal creature was cultivating the farmland.

An ogre single-handedly and rapidly plowed the land, a task that would normally require dozens of people.

"Originally, vampire mages do it, but once the basic cultivation is complete, the ogres handle the heavy lifting. They do help, but… um… to be honest, they do the work of dozens of people and eat as much. It's almost the same, isn't it? Still, it's amazing, right?"

“…Yes, it is."

"Fortunately, this scale of production is maintained because there's a faction of vampire mages specialized in botany, alchemy, and magic. Without them, the refugees might have starved to death long ago."

Surprisingly, the one directing the ogre's cultivation was an elderly farmer with a bent back.

Whether this was efficient or not was uncertain, as Harriet suggested.

However, they were surviving.

They were trying to live together in harmony.

Charlotte etched that sight into her memory.

"Honestly, the biggest issue in Edina is food. The scale of Edina has grown too much since the Gate Incident. With the help of demon mages and other demons, they are somehow sustaining themselves. But that's all thanks to the Demon King… I mean, Reinhardt's power."

“…I see."

In Edina, the existence of the Demon King is absolute. The humans of the island fear the Demon King, and the demons follow him unconditionally, which is why there is no conflict. If the Demon King were to disappear, the demons would not accept living alongside humans, and the humans would struggle even more.

The Archdemon commands absolute obedience from the demons.

And the humans on the island fear the Demon King.

Though this coexistence appears complete on the surface, it would be impossible without the existence of the Demon King.

"In Darkland, the Demon King's existence is more like a god than a king. I heard that demons originally fought and divided among different races. It was like that until the Archdemon appeared and took control of them all."

"Yes, I know."

Closer to a god than a king.

The Archdemon.

Charlotte quietly observed the landscape created by this absolute being, a scene never seen before in the world.

Charlotte had heard many stories from Harriet.

How many refugees had flowed into the island so far.

How the demons had made contact and entered the island.

How they built houses for them to live in with magic and cultivated the land.

How the United Holy Church was founded.

While she was locked away in the Spring Palace, blaming herself for everything.

What the Demon King had accomplished while trying to do something, rather than wallowing in guilt and self-loathing.

"You've really… done so much…"

The Demon King had saved countless people and created a landscape that seemed impossible to exist in the world.

What someone who kept moving forward, even after failing at everything, had managed to achieve.

Charlotte looked at it from the perspective of a defeated person.

Can I take responsibility for this?

Can she, a defeated and traitorous person, bear the weight of someone's shining accomplishments?

"Charlotte, this isn't pity."

Harriet looked at Charlotte and spoke with a serious gaze.

"Reinhardt has a lot to do."

"…"

"Really, way too much."

"…I suppose."

"Reinhardt brought you here because he needs you, not because he feels sorry for you."

Harriet wasn't angry.

"If you want to be a sinner and a traitor, keep living like that."

"…"

"But if you want to live as the administrator of Edina, which Reinhardt needs, then that's what you'll become."

Charlotte looked up at Harriet.

"Do you want to be someone Reinhardt needs or someone who constantly demands his attention even though he's terribly busy?"

Charlotte's lips trembled.

"Of course… I…"

Everyone here is someone Reinhardt needs.

She knew this because she had heard so many stories from Harriet.

Liana, Olivia, Airi, and Harriet.

All of them had important tasks.

Reinhardt had brought Charlotte here for a very important task as well.

If she wanted to live as a defeated person, she could continue living as one.

However, she would become a burden that required Reinhardt's endless attention.

Harriet patted Charlotte's shoulder.

"If you know, just do it. Don't overthink it."

"It was like that when we first came here."

"If we thought too much, we would have stopped in the midst of guilt."

"We just thought about taking one step at a time."

"Rather than thinking about how many people would die on the continent."

"We built houses for those who had lost their homes."

"Instead of thinking about whose responsibility the situation was."

"We quickly set sail to escape the monster and save the people, bringing them to this island."

"Rather than mourning the many lives lost and dwelling on what we've lost."

"We had to feed those with nothing to eat, so we expanded the farmland."

"If we think too much about the distant future or abstract concepts, we become paralyzed and unable to act."

"Let's take it one step at a time."

"Let's move forward one step at a time."

"And as time passes…"

"Look."

Harriet gestures around.

She gestures at the world.

"Before we know it, this is what we've become."

"It's not perfect, it's incomplete, and there's still a lot of uncertainty, but we can't say we haven't done anything."

Charlotte looks at Harriet with wide eyes.

There was an endless gap between those who were motionless and those who took at least one step every day.

She looks at the landscape created by that difference.

Whether she deserve this. Whether it's okay. Whether she can be forgiven.

Whether she has the power to waver in the face of such beauty.

Simply being still is just that.

Before considering qualifications and rights.

As Reinhardt instructed, she took care of her weakened body, nourished her health, built up her strength.

Learning more about Edina.

Taking that first step, beginning to handle matters from the throne.

What is the reason not to take that step?

Harriet's comforting yet persuasive words that there are things that must be done.

Eventually, Charlotte gave up on all thoughts.

There would be no rights and duties.

But there were things Reinhardt asked her to do.

Then all she has to do is just that.

She takes that step.

It is a sin to stand still, thinking about whether she deserves to walk this path.

Looking at Harriet's warm smile, Charlotte grits her teeth.

She felt like crying because of those who went to such lengths for her.

But.

Charlotte cried a lot during those two years.

That was all she did.

She didn't do anything else but cry.

Therefore, without letting the tears welling up from deep within her heart flow, Charlotte wiped them away with her sleeve while gritting her teeth.

Her devilishly red eyes, her eyelids reddening.

"Alright. I'll give it a try, whatever it may be."

Her thoughts of wrongdoing did not change.

But the sense of obligation to do something.

She was able to regain that sense of responsibility to accomplish it somehow.

—---

Harriet's persuasion was successful.

Instead of sinking into thoughts and self-loathing, she had to focus on what was ahead and take one step at a time.

Reinhardt didn't forgive her, but brought her because she was needed, so if she felt guilty, she should respond to that need.

So Charlotte had many conversations with Harriet afterward, and tried to

understand the situation in Edina by inspecting the area.

After a thorough assessment of the Edina Archipelago, Charlotte reached one conclusion.

"Um… Can I be honest?"

"Yeah, you should be honest."

At Reinhardt's words, Charlotte shook her head firmly.

"This isn't a country."

“…Huh?"

Charlotte's assessment was harsh.

"It's more like… a national-scale soup kitchen? I'd call it something like that. Calling it a country seems… a bit off."

Charlotte determined that the Edina Archipelago was in dire need of a comprehensive overhaul.

"The greatest problem is that the people of Edina would starve to death without the demons. Bringing refugees from the continent is good, and providing them with free land and homes to live in is also good, but without magic and the help of the demons, the basic issue of food self-sufficiency cannot be solved."

"Although they say they're continuously expanding the cultivated land, I've heard that ultimately, magicians are involved in the process. There is a limit to the available human resources. Even now, the area where the most manpower is concentrated in this island must be related to food resources. But as the scale continues to grow, at some point, the population that can be supported will exceed the threshold."

"What this means is that this country does not have a structure where surplus goods produced by the citizens are stored in the national treasury as taxes and then supplied when needed or used for national projects. Here, the national project is for the state to produce food. It's the other way around. This is essentially a charity, not a government or a nation. The sole purpose of this state is to support the population. And even that is a burden."

"Of course, doing such things isn't wrong. However, there are no measures in place for when the supported population grows to the point where it becomes difficult to handle. In the first place, using magic to farm is an absurd idea under normal circumstances, and the same goes for the merfolk supplying marine resources as food ingredients. We need to establish a long-term food self-sufficiency policy, one that does not rely on this bizarre situation where magicians are farming."

"The security issue is the same. The scale of the refugee residential areas has long since surpassed that of the original Lazak city center by several times, but they're trying to prevent crime in those areas simply by having guards patrol at night. However, there is a limit to the number of troops that can be maintained. That's why the crime rate in the refugee residential areas is quite high."

Food. Security. Systems. Policies. Management of areas outside the capital, and so on.

When Charlotte's story about the numerous problems of the Edina Archipelago ended, Reinhardt's mouth was wide open in shock.

It looked like a country, but in reality, it was a charity.

It was a strange structure where the national treasury and the king's power worked for the citizens, not for inflating the national treasury under the guise of taxes.

That was the reality of Edina that the Demon King had built in just two years.

After finishing her story, Charlotte looked quietly at Reinhardt.

"The reason we have managed to come this far is because the demons under you have extraordinary abilities. No matter the situation, such capable individuals wouldn't normally do such work."

Edina was only able to survive because these exceptional individuals were engaged in work they would not normally do. The people of Edina were merely military dependents at this point.

The reality of Edina was that the nation itself could not survive without the Demon King.

CHAPTER 474

In the rebuilt Darkland, Edina, Charlotte believed that they were relying too heavily on the Demon King.

This was a qualitatively different issue from the fact that Darkland could not exist without Archdemons.

"So… what should we do?"

“…First, the food problem will inevitably be a long-term policy. For now, we need to address the systemic issues. Petty crimes are rampant, but too many cases that could have ended with simple acts of violence escalate into murder."

"Increasing the size of the city guard seems difficult. Honestly, the existing force is already hard to manage."

"This isn't just about the city guards."

Charlotte shook her head.

"The punishment for criminals is too uniform. It's either execution or hard labor, and the criteria for punishment is established too simply. And there are more cases of being sent to labor camps than executions. It seems like you tend to avoid extreme punishments, equivalent to the death penalty. Is that right?"

"Well… I thought it would be better to use them as labor force rather than killing them…”

Charlotte shook her head at his words.

"Let's assume that someone had a grudge against another and a fight broke out. If violence occurs and the opponent is severely injured, the assailant's sentence to the labor camp is certain. If they kill or beat them down, they still go to the labor camp. Some people just kill because the outcome is the same anyway."

“…What?"

"Of course, this is just an extreme example, and not everyone is like that. But there are certainly those who would make such choices. That's why the punishment for each crime must be inevitably detailed."

Charlotte discussed the problems that arise if those who deserve death are not punished with extreme measures.

"Reinhardt, the purpose of extreme punishments, like execution, is not to penalize criminals but to show the general public the consequences of serious crimes. The fundamental function of extreme punishment, including execution, is to consume major criminals and display them to society."

As a leader, Reinhardt thought it was more efficient to use criminals as labor force rather than killing them, so he avoided extreme punishments. He believed it was inefficient.

But Charlotte was suggesting the possibility that he might have inadvertently encouraged simple acts of violence to escalate into murder.

If the punishment is the same for different degrees of crime, some will choose more serious crimes.

"Edina currently lacks proper laws, but first and foremost, there is no system of punishment. It needs to be established. Edina's situation is completely different from that of a typical country. Inevitably, many outsiders will enter, and the problems between people will only increase, not decrease. Therefore, punishment should be harsher than necessary. The Empire is currently in extreme resource scarcity, making it impossible to reduce crime rates through execution, but Edina is not. So, it's still possible to handle criminals through punishment."

"I see…"

"And it's true that there's an absolute shortage of city guards. It's going to be difficult to increase their numbers in the current situation."

Charlotte then seemingly reached a conclusion with ease.

"Make the refugees organize their own vigilante groups."

"Vigilante groups? This is the capital, and we can't manage the capital well enough,

so we're making them organize vigilante groups… Is that right?"

"We don't have the luxury of considering that right now."

"Hmm…"

At Charlotte's words, Reinhardt rolled his eyes as if he couldn't agree.

"But that so-called voluntary vigilante group is like volunteer work. Who would do such a thing for free? If they don't want to work for free, you have to give them money. But if you do that, you're financially supporting the vigilante group after organizing it. How is that different from the guards? Then why form a vigilante group instead of incorporating them into the guards? I don't understand."

At Reinhardt's words, Charlotte shook her head.

"Don't give them money, give them a little authority."

"Authority?"

"Yes, or in other words, power."

Charlotte calmly stared at Reinhardt.

"There will be many people who are desperate for even that small amount of power. Money? They don't need it. There are people who have power itself as their goal."

"Ah…"

"Give them the authority to appoint a vigilante leader and recruit members. And give them the authority to arrest or interrogate people. Then, even without earning a penny, they'll patrol the streets at night, thinking they've accomplished something. As a result, the vigilantes will patrol the streets at night for free. That's all you need, right?"

Understanding human vanity and hunger for power, Charlotte knew that people could be moved by power alone.

Reinhardt broke into a cold sweat at the seemingly wicked policy.

"No, I mean… I understand what you're saying, but… If you ultimately give the vigilantes some power over the refugee area, they'll inevitably cause trouble, right? Autonomy is relatively free from control, so it's bound to become corrupt."

"Yes. They will inevitably become corrupt, an interest group, and a corrupt power that commits crimes without punishment. No, they can't make money from vigilante activities, so they'll want to fill their pockets in other ways. They have to. Vigilante work is busy, but it can't be turned into money. They have to do it inevitably."

"So, that's what will happen."

"Why worry about it?"

Charlotte made a gesture of cutting her own throat.

"Kill them. Replace them. That's all you need."

"Ah…"

"The corruption of the vigilantes is not our responsibility since they are not a government organization, right? The government's power executes the corrupt vigilante leader. It looks just and good. In reality, the government has handed over security work to the vigilantes, creating an environment where they have no choice but to become corrupt since they can't earn money. But will the public know that? When the vigilante leader is a worldly figure, and the vigilante group's wickedness is severe, hanging them will benefit the government's support."

Charlotte spoke with a calm expression, not smiling, yet not looking evil either.

Use people just enough and throw them away. Create a group that has no choice but to become corrupt and use it. Moreover, without giving them a single penny.

Charlotte knew how to do something that even the Demon King couldn't.

Corruption is bad.

So far, Reinhardt had thought of excluding the possibility of corruption.

But Charlotte was different.

She formed and used an inevitably corrupt power.

When that corruption reaches a breaking point, replace it, and make the replacement process beneficial for the government.

Pass the blame for the government's wrongdoing in forming a power bound to become corrupt onto the corrupt individual.

Their ways of thinking are fundamentally different.

"Reinhardt, there's something very important you don't understand."

"What is it?"

"The purpose of a nation is not the realization of justice or good intentions, but the preservation of the nation itself. There is no justice, relief for the poor, or charity in a vanished nation. If there's a single absolute priority a nation must protect, it is the nation's own existence. That's all."

A government does not have to be good and just.

A government exists to be maintained.

Without fulfilling this basic condition, no further projects or policies can exist.

Reinhardt hadn't been considering things from that perspective.

Even if there's injustice or wrongdoing, a nation must be preserved, and policies and projects must be carried out for that purpose.

This was absent in the Edina Archipelago, and Reinhardt hadn't considered it.

The scale was growing, but the system was weak.

That's why Charlotte believed a system needed to be created.

Since the current size is becoming difficult to handle, temporary measures are necessary.

In terms of national preservation, Reinhardt couldn't deny that Charlotte's approach

was better than his own.

"I'm just beginning to grasp that you're of royal blood…"

Reinhardt nodded blankly with a stunned expression. Charlotte looked down, narrowing her eyes.

"There's nothing to be done if you're disappointed… If this is the only way I can help you… Somehow, I have to do well."

"…"

"So it's right for me, who will be the regent, to do this. You just need to remain a kind and benevolent ruler for the people. The more people fear my regency, the more certain their support for you will be."

And so, Charlotte decided to take all the blame for the cruel rule she would impose from now on.

The more people hate the regent. The more they despise the regent.

The support for the Demon King becomes even more solid.

Like using the vigilante group, Charlotte intended to use herself to strengthen Reinhardt's rule.

—---

Whether Charlotte had finished what could be called preparation was uncertain.

Just as I became king unprepared, Charlotte didn't sit on the throne after completing full preparation to become a queen.

In my unprepared state, I hastily built a country, so it was bound to be a disaster.

We can maintain it for now, but it's unclear how long that will be possible.

That's why I brought Charlotte to consolidate our foundation.

Though I tried to make it as plausible as possible, to Charlotte, Edina seemed like a

grotesquely constructed structure.

It's uncertain if Charlotte can handle all those issues.

But Charlotte could think of things I couldn't.

Sometimes, knowing how to use people for a purpose, even if it means discarding them, is necessary.

It's cruel, but I couldn't deny the need for it.

Charlotte's approach to issues and problems was on a different level from mine.

While it's not possible to think that everything will improve just because Charlotte takes charge of the Edina Archipelago, it's at least better than me continuing on the throne.

I had long reached my limit in handling the political tasks arising in Edina.

Someone to take my place.

Someone who can undoubtedly do better than me.

And.

In some ways, an even more terrifying figure than me, the most fitting person for the Demon King.

"Introduce her."

In the hall where the nobles gathered, I carefully seated Charlotte, clad in a black dress, on the throne as she looked down on the people.

"From today, Charlotte de Gardias will be the regent of Edina."

At my words, the tense nobles, already on edge due to the mysterious presence, let out a sigh of relief.

Charlotte de Gardias.

From that name alone, one could easily tell where Charlotte was from.

"Remember that she is my proxy and an existence of equal standing to me."

I stood up, and Charlotte, who took my place on the throne, quietly looked down at the nobles.

"I will keep it brief."

Charlotte didn't offer any pleasantries or other such formalities.

From the first imperial princess of the empire, she had become the queen of Darkland, and she looked down upon the people.

"All things…"

Her voice was not particularly powerful, nor brimming with confidence.

"…will be much different from now on."

However, everyone seemed to be overwhelmed by the charisma that emanated from Charlotte's very presence.

Charlotte began addressing the most urgent matters first.

The systematization of punishments.

And the organization of the vigilante corps.

It was a system that made the refugees responsible for the security of their own residential areas.

The next day, I saw a scaffold being constructed in the central square of Lajak city.

Depending on the severity of their crimes, some people would be flogged there, while those with heinous crimes would be beheaded or hanged.

The residents of Edina would witness someone's death on display and become

fearful of committing crimes.

The effects of public executions could not be measured, but considering the current situation in the Edina Archipelago, I could not deny Charlotte's opinion that such measures were necessary.

I was not unaware of the necessity either, but perhaps I had avoided making such decisions, citing efficiency.

Ultimately, I may have not yet shaken off the petty notion that such acts were barbaric and evil from a modern perspective.

From now on, practically everything I had done in the Edina Archipelago would be done by Charlotte.

Now, I would step down from the throne for a while and do what I needed to do.

Charlotte began governing with an iron hand.

The rate of warp gate destruction slowed down.

Though we had destroyed a considerable number of warp gates over the past two years, we would not be able to destroy all of them in the near future.

So, there was still time before the final battle approached.

In preparation for future events, there were things I needed to do.

Having brought Charlotte here, I could finally shed the ill-fitting role I had been wearing.

Though there were still no outsiders to see, I gathered the people and began to speak.

"I will be leaving my post for quite some time."

"Leaving your post?"

At my words, everyone tilted their heads in confusion.

"I'm not sure how long it will take, but if the situation becomes unfavorable, I'll return. So, don't worry too much."

As an Archdemon, Charlotte also had control over the demon race. Furthermore, she would lead the government more wisely than I would.

Therefore, there was no real reason for me to be in Edina any longer.

So, I planned to do something I hadn't been able to do until now.

"Are you going to do something dangerous again?"

At Olivia's question, I shook my head.

"In a way, it's to prepare for dangerous situations… But nothing is certain yet, so it's difficult to say. Still, I'll be taking plenty of teleport scrolls, so don't worry too much."

"Even so, going alone is a bit… No matter where you go, it seems dangerous…"

It was Harriet who spoke.

Everyone knew that I would somehow manage whatever it was.

I knew that I wouldn't die so pathetically at the hands of roaming monster hordes on the continent, but it seemed inevitable that they would worry.

"I'd like to take someone with me, but it's not a place where that's possible."

I didn't particularly want to insist on traveling alone.

However, the place I needed to go now was one where I didn't even know if I could find it by myself.

Olivia, Harriet, Charlotte, and Airi.

None of them opposed my decision, but their expressions were full of worry.

"It won't take too long."

Before the gate situation is resolved, I must become much stronger than I am now.

That's why I brought Charlotte here to govern, and I have to do what it takes to become stronger than I am now.

The monster of the last gate, too.

And in a possible fight against Ellen.

I have to become stronger in order to survive.

Airi, seemingly concerned, asked.

"Can't you at least tell us where you're going?"

“...I'm sorry. I can't tell you."

It's a place where I'm not even sure if I can find it.

And even if I can find it, I don't know if I can obtain what I want.

I can't tell them where I'm going because they'll surely prevent me from going if they knew.

Ellen's hometown, Rezaira.

That's where I intend to go.

CHAPTER 475

I had been staying in Edina because I couldn't leave, but now that there was someone to take my place, I wanted to leave as soon as possible.

I planned to depart the day after completing the preparations.

The night before departure.

Charlotte came to see me.

At first, she seemed extremely flustered when she saw that I shared a bedroom with Harriet, but she didn't ask any questions.

In fact, her not asking anything made it even more awkward.

It was as if she was saying that if I decided so, she would accept it.

On the terrace outside the bedroom, Charlotte asks me a question.

"Reinhardt, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"I'd like to know the exact scope of my authority."

Did she mean she wanted to know the limits of what she could do?

In the end, Charlotte is a rolling stone.

For two years, she managed to keep rolling, and even though I was confident she would do better than me, she suddenly found herself in the king's seat.

Charlotte calmly looked out the window.

"I think I can handle the demons and the humans. But as you know, the council of elders, including the public servants, are your friends and collaborators. So, my

commands and control won't work on them."

“…I suppose."

"I'm happy you trust me, and I will try to live up to that trust. But if you're away from Edina for too long at this time, it could inevitably lead to discord between me and others."

Charlotte was speaking the truth.

The council of elders is not under my control.

Liana, Olivia, Harriet, and Airi are my friends.

While I can control those below them, they have the power to ignore my orders, as they are practically the founding fathers.

In fact, Liana and Olivia seemed to have a negative view of Charlotte.

There was a high possibility that they would rebel if Charlotte suddenly began giving orders.

Leaving Edina before my rule was stabilized was a risky decision.

Charlotte was suggesting that internal strife might occur.

In Edina, Charlotte's only source of power was my declaration of support as the king.

With just that, she had nothing else to prove her control over the entire city.

"If you tell me that I have no command or control over the Four Heavenly Kings, I won't say anything about their affairs."

She wasn't asking for authority, but for clarification of her authority.

I wanted Charlotte's rule to completely succeed my authority.

However, I agreed that Olivia and Liana, who had worked hard to build Edina until now, might feel uncomfortable with Charlotte suddenly giving orders.

Even if they understood it rationally, it would be emotionally difficult to accept.

In fact, I never had any problems with them because there was no emotional conflict. They generally agreed with my opinions, and when I thought they were wrong, we discussed them until we were both convinced.

In Harriet's case, she tried to help Charlotte wholeheartedly.

In Airi's case, she seemed to feel the influence of the Archdemon from Charlotte, so there would be no problem.

However, Liana hated the empire, and Olivia disliked Charlotte, who she couldn't trust.

I was worried about the possibility of friction between them.

What should I do?

Four Heavenly Kings.

In other words, if I told Charlotte not to try and control the Four Heavenly Kings and the council of elders, she would be left with only half of her power.

I need someone who can fully replace me, not just a half measure.

So, in essence, I need a queen of the demon realm who can wholly stand in for me, not just a regent.

"I know my place. So, I understand that I don't have the authority to command or interfere with them…"

"Enough."

However, I cut off my words upon hearing Charlotte's remark.

"You are my substitute. A complete one."

I look into Charlotte's eyes and say this.

"You should consider yourself another Demon King, not a mere regent. And you must

become that."

Charlotte needs commands, not persuasion or requests.

That's what I desire.

I want you to become my complete replacement.

Liana and Olivia.

There may be emotional conflicts with them, and political problems may arise.

They may even think that Olivia and Liana harbor resentment towards me because of Charlotte.

If they are resentful towards me, I will feel sorry. And I may have to apologize.

But this is not some political game in a corner; this is the operation of state affairs.

Just because Olivia has done a lot for me and Liana has made many sacrifices for me, it doesn't give them the right to disregard the regent I've appointed.

If they deliberately ignore and exclude Charlotte, I will inevitably be disappointed with the two who intentionally hinder the operation of state affairs just because of their emotions.

From the beginning, I don't think of them as people who would do just that.

They will recognize the necessity of Charlotte.

And Charlotte will earn that recognition.

She must prove that she has the ability.

"So, somehow, get a hold of them."

"…"

Charlotte silently looks up at me.

As soon as she becomes the regent, the king, who should support her, leaves his position.

Like when I started, Charlotte must lead state affairs among the officials who dislike her.

It's not an easy job I've put her in, but she must become my complete replacement, no matter how difficult it is.

No, it's a command.

"Yes, I understand."

Charlotte nods her head.

It's strange to think this way, but

Charlotte's excessively submissive appearance was, in a way, cute.

—---

The next day.

Reinhardt leaves for somewhere.

"Why… Where is he going and why doesn't he tell us…"

Harriet deeply sighs as she looks at the spot where Reinhardt just disappeared by teleportation.

With the king gone, leaving a regent in his place, Harriet, Charlotte, and Olivia remain.

Once the handover is mostly completed, Harriet will return to her original duty of magical research after assigning a new secretary.

The Demon King appointed a regent not only for his own freedom but also to release Harriet, who had been using her brain on his behalf.

Charlotte quietly looks at the spot where Reinhardt left.

And naturally, she couldn't help but feel Olivia's gaze on her.

Charlotte gazes at Olivia hesitantly.

"Do you have something to say, Archbishop Olivia?"

"…"

Olivia silently looks at Charlotte, seemingly trying to gauge something.

Charlotte couldn't read any hostility from that gaze.

At least, not yet.

"Reinhardt is too kind."

"…"

"Too stupidly kind. I was thinking that he shouldn't trust an untrustworthy person. That's all."

Charlotte silently looks at Olivia, taken aback by her blunt words.

"If I were to betray Reinhardt, what could I do?"

"…"

"If I were to deliberately ruin Edina, where could I possibly go afterward?"

At that, Olivia fell silent.

"Considering that Reinhardt saved me from execution in the empire, there's no way I could return there."

Harriet listened quietly to their conversation.

"So, there's no reason for me to intentionally ruin this place, nor any reason that I should."

"Some people would rather ruin themselves than let anyone else be ruined. There

seem to be quite a few people like that these days."

At Olivia's words, Charlotte nodded her head.

"Yes, that's true."

Olivia had seen many people willing to sacrifice their own lives to kill the Demon King.

Such deep hatred seeks destruction, even if it means destroying oneself in the process.

"I understand that you can't trust me, and you have every right to think that way. After all, I have committed sins."

"…"

"But still, I'll do my best."

Charlotte lowered her tail.

She never intended to fight in the first place.

It wasn't even a fair comparison.

Olivia was here with these people because she trusted Reinhardt.

Charlotte didn't trust Reinhardt at first, but he had ultimately saved her, so it was different.

"Though it may be greedy of me to hope for your support, please don't think that I would do anything to ruin something on purpose."

Charlotte bowed her head deeply to Olivia.

"From now on, I look forward to working with you."

"…"

Once an empress, she now bowed her head to someone who had made a greater

decision than her own out of guilt.

At that humble bow, Olivia furrowed her brow.

“…Why is it even more annoying?"

Wishing that Charlotte had acted more annoying, Olivia kicked a pebble and stormed out of the castle.

“Ah, this is so irritating!”

One needs two hands to clap.

While angry, Olivia left the castle yelling, frustrated that her counterpart didn't provide a reason for her to be angry as well.

Charlotte looked at Harriet.

"Thank you for everything so far, Harriet. I hope we can continue to work well together."

"Ah, no, why are you bowing your head like that…”

Harriet, greatly flustered, hastily waved her hands.

—---

I don't know much about Ellen's hometown.

Kernstadt, at the southwestern edge of the border. A village in the mountains where a considerable number of people don't even know it exists, according to Ellen. I have a rough idea of its location on the map, but it's overly vast.

The village's name is Rezaira.

Of course, the name isn't marked on any map.

Perhaps, under normal circumstances, there might have been people in nearby villages who knew Rezaira's location. But since the Gate Incident, such small villages have all been destroyed.

Thus, I have no choice but to give up on finding someone who knows the exact location of Rezaira.

I have no way of knowing whether Rezaira has remained intact after this incident.

However, even though I don't know for sure, Ellen's mother is presumed to be a stronger figure than even Saviolin Turner.

I don't know anything specific about Rezaira or Ellen's mother.

Ellen's mother's name is Luna Artorious.

And she called herself the Lord of the Sun and Moon.

Therefore, it is speculated that she might be related to the Sun and Moon (Sunday and Monday) Vampires – the ancient vampire tribes that were said to have disappeared long ago.

And she said that it was a principle not to interfere with the affairs of the world.

For some unknown reason, it is believed that even now, amidst the Gate Incident, there has been no activity in a place called Rezaira.

Could Rezaira have really escaped the effects of the Gate Incident?

Is Luna Artorius truly not involved in this situation?

Will I be able to find Rezaira?

I still know nothing.

I cannot directly ask Ellen about Rezaira's location. It is best to avoid meeting Ellen if possible. Besides, the situation doesn't permit it.

My reason for seeking Luna Artorius is simple.

I don't know how to persuade her, but I intend to ask for her teachings. She possesses a transcendent power that even I cannot fathom.

I don't know the method, and she has little reason to teach me.

If things remain as they are, I will have to use the Alsbringer in the final battle.

I don't want to die like that.

Perhaps I can resolve the situation without using the Alsbringer, but if I ever have to fight Ellen for some reason, I cannot defeat her in my current state.

The unchanging truth is that I must at least be equal or superior to Ellen in skill to have a choice.

I must at least reach the Master Class before the final battle. If possible, I need to obtain even greater power.

While there are excellent mages around me, none have reached the Master Class.

The strongest person I know is Saviolin Turner.

However, asking for her teachings in these times would be an absurd impossibility.

That's why I must seek Luna Artorius, who is presumed to be even stronger than her.

It is a truly vague task.

To find Ellen's mother and beg her to make me stronger.

In this situation.

In these times.

Isn't it too ridiculous considering everything has gone awry?

Monsters roam the continent, but as I stood before the mountain range in the southwest of Kernstadt, I felt nothing but uncertainty.

"What is this…?"

They said it was a rural village.

Before me lay a mountain range that resembled a natural fortress filled with strange rock formations.

When I heard it from Ellen, it seemed like an ordinary village nestled in the hills, but it was a vast alpine region.

This region was called the Sren Mountains on the map.

Ellen…

Calling this place a rural village when it's hidden in such a mountainous area is a bit of a stretch…

Come to think of it, Ellen has always been a bit different from ordinary people.

I didn't expect to find Rezaira easily.

I already confirmed it with the map, but this mountain range is incredibly vast.

And there is no way a proper road leading to Rezaira could be built in such treacherous terrain.

-Aaaahhhhhhh

The howls of unknown monsters echo from within the mountains.

The monsters that have been roaming the continent have already infiltrated these mountains.

How many days, weeks, or even months will I have to wander?

In this mountainous region where monsters lurk, can I really find Rezaira?

Where will I sleep and find food?

Even if it is to prepare for the final battle.

I've ended up playing a survival game in this mountainous region teeming with monsters.

"Sigh…"

Well, when have things ever been easy?

I have always found and obtained what I sought, no matter the difficulty.

A powerful fate is at work within me.

I intend to find Rezaira and meet Ellen's mother.

So, I will be able to find her and meet her.

I set foot into the vast and treacherous mountain range.

To not offer my life as a sacrifice in the final battle.

I must become stronger.

Without fail.

CHAPTER 476

"It's now impossible to destroy the Warp Gates with only the guerrilla units… is this correct?"

"I'm afraid so, Your Majesty."

At Savolin Turner's words, filled with a grave expression, Bertus nodded with a somber look on his face.

He already knew that as the number of Warp Gates decreased, the operations to destroy them were becoming increasingly difficult.

In the most recent operation, tasked with destroying three Warp Gates, Savolin Turner had only managed to destroy one before being forced to withdraw their troops.

The monsters were too numerous and too strong.

In that operation, two Swordmasters of Shanafel and four Royal Mages had perished.

Such a powerful force could not be easily replenished, making it a painfully severe loss.

They were irreplaceable Master-class forces, and their loss was now permanent.

As the Gates became more dangerous, the power of the guerrilla units continued to decline.

However, the longer the complete destruction of the Gates was delayed, the more monsters would be unleashed upon the world.

"What do you think of combining Lady Ellen's unit with Lady Turner's unit?"

Although the reconstruction of the city continued, it was becoming increasingly difficult to rescue survivors.

Now, they would change Ellen's unit's mission to destroying the remaining Warp Gates and form a new, highly powerful unit.

At the Emperor's words, Turner lowered her head with a grave expression.

"Doing so would allow us to temporarily continue the Warp Gate destruction operations… However, I believe that such losses would still occur in the long run. Additionally, the risk of Ellen Artorious's death… cannot be completely ruled out."

If Ellen Artorious were to die while carrying out the Warp Gate destruction operations, it would be a disaster for humanity unlike any other.

People held great expectations and hope for Ellen. If she were to die not from fighting the Demon King but in an attempt to suppress the Warp Gates, humanity would be plunged into despair and lamentation.

While it was true that Ellen was already doing dangerous work, Bertus could not bear to push her into an even more perilous situation, especially one with a high risk of death.

Yet, he couldn't simply leave everything to Savolin Turner as before.

The situation was dire.

It wasn't as if there were no options at all.

"Ultimately… it seems that the time has come to organize a large-scale army."

“…Yes, Your Majesty."

They needed to operate a massive force for a full-scale war.

Large-scale magical transportation was impossible.

Thus, the assembled troops would have to rely on magical supplies as they roamed the continent, embarking on an expedition to destroy the Warp Gates.

To preserve the forces of the Master-class and Archmages, they would have to sacrifice those of slightly lower rank.

It was impossible to predict how many would die in the process.

If they were to assemble and deploy such a force, they wouldn't be able to easily return. They would have to travel great distances to reach the Warp Gates and fight countless battles with the roaming monsters on the continent.

They had to organize a suicide squad that could not return until all the Warp Gates were destroyed.

Since the guerrilla units could no longer carry out their mission, they now had to truly wage war.

To put an end to the Gate crisis, they had to organize a large-scale army.

They had to travel an enormous distance on foot, so it was uncertain how many years it would take for the army to return.

Would they even be able to return?

However, if the Gate crisis did not end, humanity would be annihilated.

That's why it was now something that had to be done.

The decision had been made to gather everything that remained and organize a massive army, one that could be called the culmination of human effort.

"Your Majesty, what about the Princess…?"

"Reinhardt has taken her."

Turner was aware of this plan as well.

“…I see."

With a crestfallen expression, Saviolin Turner nodded at the Emperor's words.

The Empire had been unable to protect the Princess.

That was why they had to stage a play.

"Although there were unexpected situations… let's leave it at that."

In any case, things had gone as Bertus wanted.

The secret organization known as the Black Order appeared and attempted to kill the Demon King.

Although there was an unintended situation where Ellen, who happened to be at the scene, had to fight Reinhardt forcibly, in the end, Reinhardt feigned defeat at Ellen's hands and fled.

Thus, although there were considerable unforeseen civilian casualties, the atmosphere in the Empire was very positive.

They could not execute the Princess, and the Demon King's minions had escaped.

But the people saw Ellen Artorius overpowering the Demon King.

That seemed to be enough.

Though the Demon King had appeared, the Imperial Capital was in high spirits, having witnessed the hero currently holding the upper hand against him.

One week had passed since Reinhardt left Edina.

Charlotte, who had taken over the reins of the regency, was doing her best to carry out the affairs of the state.

Having been entrusted with full authority by Reinhardt, Charlotte not only carried out state affairs but also placed greater emphasis on assessing the current situation.

She could immediately organize a police force and systematize punishments to establish a standard for collective responsibility, but first, she had to confirm many things with her own eyes.

Edina had originally been a small country, but as it grew in size, it was no different from a child with an enlarged body.

Hence, it could not be expected to have the same laws and systems as the Empire.

Charlotte initially focused on the issue that had given Reinhardt the biggest headache: numbers.

The number of people, the amount of stockpiled food, the number of crimes, and the number of prisoners in detention facilities.

What was needed, and what was lacking?

Having somewhat memorized the numbers she needed to know, Charlotte carried out the next task.

That was, in a way, an even more important task than remembering the numbers: whether the numbers she remembered were accurate.

Sometimes, a situation is reported to be abundant but is in fact severely lacking.

Sometimes, there is more than the recorded figures.

Usually, such numbers are slightly tampered with along the way.

And finding the reason for the discrepancy in those numbers was Charlotte's role.

Sitting on the throne, Charlotte stared at the man who was kneeling before her, surrounded by guards.

"Explain the discrepancy between the amount of fish brought in for the purpose of producing dried fish and the amount shipped out."

Charlotte never thought she would be questioning the manager of a dried fish production facility in her life.

But the most critical issue and problem in Edina was food.

Food was a matter directly related to the lives of the people.

The fish and shellfish collected by the mermaids were vital and essential food resources, and the process of turning those fish into dried fish was one of Edina's most critical food projects, as it produced long-term preserved food for the winter.

There was a difference between the amount of fish brought in and the quantity of dried fish produced.

The person responsible for that dried fish production process was now in front of Charlotte.

"I, Your Highness…"

"Address me as Regent."

The fearful official, trembling, looked into Charlotte's red eyes and seemed to bury his head in the ground out of terror.

"Your Highness, basically, not all fish that are brought in for production are completed during the dried fish manufacturing process. A significant portion is lost during intermediate steps due to the mistakes or errors made by on-site workers, so the actual yield is not that high…"

"Are you saying the yield is low?"

"Yes, yes…"

"What's the loss rate?"

"Well, that is…"

"As the person in charge of the production, you should be aware of the average yield. Don't tell me you don't know?"

Not knowing what he should know.

Even if he didn't embezzle any dried fish in reality, not knowing what he should know is already a sin.

"The actual yield is around 80%…"

"That cannot be. Comparing the input and output quantities, the average actual yield is less than 60%. In reality, about 40% of the fish just disappear."

Charlotte calmly stared at the official who had provided false reports.

"Even if there were errors in the actual figures, those errors themselves are a crime. Issues related to preserved food are critical national projects in preparation for the winter. It is a severe dereliction of duty for the person in charge to be unaware of the situation. Additionally, if 40% of the product must disappear, there must be a technical problem. However, there hasn't been a single report about the need for technical improvements or any raised issues. Do you only do what you're told without understanding the purpose of this work?"

"Your Highness… But… Various things happen on-site… It's inevitable… That is…"

"Inevitable what?"

Charlotte tilted her head slightly.

"I have already confirmed that the dried fish you embezzled is being distributed in the Lazak black market. Let me hear more of your excuses."

"Your Highness! I have committed a sin worthy of death!"

As the official's face turned pale, he violently slammed his head on the floor. Charlotte smiled.

"It's a lie."

"…Pardon?"

"I have nothing better to do than to find out if someone like you is distributing dried fish in the market. I just tried saying it."

Charlotte laughed while looking at the frozen official.

"Nice to see you confess with just one poke."

Charlotte gestured to the guards.

"Investigate all of this man's crimes and execute him publicly. Surely there will be accomplices, so uncover them as well. Also, after you are executed, if any accomplices are found, I will execute your wife and children too. So, if you want to make their remaining lives comfortable, confess everything without lying."

"Your Highness! Please, forgive me!"

"Take him away."

Charlotte silently watched as the dried fish production line manager was dragged away by the guards.

Crimes occur everywhere.

Charlotte was not curious about why he had committed the crime.

It could have been for an inevitable reason, or simply for his own desires.

But once you start sympathizing, there is no end.

So, Charlotte had no intention of even considering such matters from the beginning.

"Your Highness…"

One of the attendants, who had silently observed Charlotte's decision, cautiously opened her mouth.

"Speak."

Seemingly unable to meet Charlotte's gaze, one of the attendants shivered.

"His Majesty the Demon King originally… did not discuss collective punishment when dealing with crimes…"

"Ah… I see."

Reinhardt's reign.

Charlotte was somewhat aware of how it had been.

Rather than killing, they had used them for labor, and even when they committed the most heinous crimes, only the perpetrators were punished.

Even those who attempted to assassinate the Demon King were only executed, and their families were not punished.

Reinhardt's view on punishment went beyond the simple question of good and evil, focusing on individual punishment.

However, Charlotte's view on punishment was different.

A single punishment serves as a warning to a hundred others.

Punishment is not a matter of morality, but a tool of governance.

"Didn't I say so?"

Charlotte spoke in a cold voice.

"From now on, many things will be different."

Crime and its punishment serve to instill a sense of caution in society.

"I have been granted authority over the entire administration of Edina and have been guaranteed the utmost autonomy in that regard."

"So, if I want to punish, I will punish."

"And if I want to pardon, I will pardon."

"Especially, the food-related businesses are directly linked to the lives of all Edina's citizens."

"For those in charge of such businesses to seek petty personal gains in the process is a serious crime that shakes the foundation of Edina."

"Edina is full of mouths."

"Far too many."

"So, I plan to reduce as many of those shameless mouths that suck the lifeblood of the nation as possible."

"From now on, regardless of their affiliations, anyone caught pursuing personal gains in Edina's food businesses will be publicly executed without exception, and their families who benefited from such ill-gotten gains will also be disposed of without

exception."

Charlotte saw the officials shudder.

Among them were demon officials, but the demons who had absolute trust in the Demon King showed no fear in their expressions.

Those who were terrified were all humans.

"It seems there are those who have reason to fear, but if you are clean, you have nothing to fear."

Charlotte sat on the throne, resting her chin on her arm, scrutinizing the faces of the officials.

"Pray to the gods that your corruption does not catch my eye."

It's not just you who will die; your loved ones could vanish as well.

The lenient rule of the Demon King was over. Charlotte's reign would shed much blood to strengthen Edina's discipline.

Those who cared only for their own pockets in their complacency would have to brace themselves for a harsher reality.

"As for the pardons… Reinhardt might not like it."

At Harriet's words, Charlotte nodded.

"True. But his rule has been too lenient so far."

"…"

Charlotte's reign was strikingly different, even if it had the same goal.

Harriet was worried about what Reinhardt would think when he returned, his whereabouts unknown.

Did Reinhardt know this would happen when he entrusted the administration to Charlotte?

Harriet couldn't tell.

"Even the low-ranking officials are mocking the royal family and embezzling resources. Those in the know understand that the Demon King is actually quite merciful. And a merciful ruler is often seen as a foolish one. We must now eliminate such elements. We need to root out the rotten roots that do not contribute to national affairs. No, we must burn them in front of the crowds."

Indeed, Charlotte had once tried to burn herself in front of the crowds to maintain the cohesion of the empire.

Harriet didn't interject because Charlotte's words made sense.

"After all, pardons are for show. It's not a method we will use frequently. Once we make a few examples like this, discipline will be restored on its own. They need to know that if they get caught, not only they but also their entire family will be uprooted."

To kill a man as a display.

Though Harriet was a princess too, she could hardly stand the sight of Charlotte making such decisions with ease.

Two weeks since Reinhardt had left.

There had been several public executions in Lazak's main square.

The heralds recited the charges against the criminals, and the executioners beheaded them.

Through the heralds, people confirmed that the way of ruling had changed, and that Charlotte had made such decisions.

Rather than being paralyzed with fear, many people cheered.

These were mostly individuals who had embezzled public funds or committed unforgivable heinous crimes. As a result, the crowd believed it was only right for such people to die.

Of course, there were those who felt fear and voluntarily paid their taxes.

Charlotte did not sentence these individuals to death. She forgave them with a whipping or a flogging, and even took care of their wounds.

And those who had already been punished were not subjected to retroactive punishment.

In this way, Charlotte reorganized the nation, establishing new principles and regulations.

At the same time, she diligently examined the overall state of Edina.

"…”

Charlotte quietly observed the sequence of numbers in front of her.

Fort Mokna, an advance base responsible for securing survivors from the continent and sending them to Edina.

In a way, it was the most important place for Reinhardt. Liana de Grantz, known as the Thunder King to the people, was in command there.

The main forces were the United Order's knights and numerous magicians.

With an ordinary monster horde attack, it could never be destroyed, and it could not easily collapse because of the powerful supernatural Liana.

[Requested Supplies List for Fort Mokna]

"Is there a problem……?"

In response to Harriet's question from the office, Charlotte furrowed her brow.

"Can you show me the complete list of supplies sent to Fort Mokna so far?"

"Uh? Oh, sure. I'll look it up."

After bustling about the office for a while, Harriet soon brought the documents Charlotte needed.

"And can you also find any documents related to the number of survivors who have come from Fort Mokna to Edina so far?"

"Sure, got it."

What Charlotte requested was as crucial as any other document, so Harriet was able to prepare it right away.

Charlotte laid out the supply request lists by date.

Similarly, she lined up documents detailing when and how many refugees arrived on each ship.

Charlotte stared at the documents.

Harriet quietly watched Charlotte, who seemed to be pondering something unusual.

"Weren't there about two thousand permanent troops in Fort Mokna?"

"Yes. That's correct. There are around fifteen hundred combat troops, and with various other unit members, it's roughly two thousand. This number doesn't fluctuate much."

"Hmm."

Charlotte gazed at the documents for a long time.

Harriet broke into a cold sweat.

Though she didn't know what Charlotte was thinking, if there was a problem with Fort Mokna, it would become Liana's problem.

Liana didn't have any particular fondness for Charlotte.

If Charlotte discovered some misconduct at Fort Mokna and tried to rectify it, she

would inevitably clash with Liana.

The likelihood of it leading to an unpleasant situation was quite high.

"Is there a problem……?"

"Yes, there is."

Charlotte nodded in response to Harriet's question.

"Fort Mokna is demanding an excessive amount of supplies, especially food. It's not just this time; it's always been this way."

According to Charlotte's calculations, Fort Mokna was requesting an overly excessive amount of food supplies, and in reality, Edina had been providing them with such provisions.

Charlotte noticed something strange between the numbers.

CHAPTER 477

Charlotte discovered that, for quite some time now, Fort Mokna had been claiming an unusually excessive amount of food supplies.

"Could it be because of the survivors…?"

At Harriet's question, Charlotte shook her head.

"Of course, we need to stockpile food for both the residents and the refugees. But even taking that into account, it's still too much. I understand that we need to provide food for the survivors until they arrive in Edina… but according to the records I've seen, Fort Mokna is requesting more food supplies than they actually need, by my calculations. This isn't just a matter of feeding the combatants well. If we try to estimate how many refugees were in Fort Mokna at any given time, we can predict the scale of the necessary food resources, but the claims and consumption have always been much higher than necessary."

At Charlotte's words, Harriet swallowed hard.

It felt like an unwelcome conflict was coming into focus.

"So you're saying… someone at Fort Mokna is embezzling food supplies…?"

"Well, I'm not sure what they could possibly do with stolen food in a place that's practically a battlefield… but it's true that there have been excessive supply requests."

"Could the site manager in charge of demand forecasting have deliberately inflated the numbers?"

"It's possible. But even if so, what kind of greed could they possibly satisfy with that? Even if they accumulated wealth privately in Fort Mokna, they would have to bring it back to Edina. How could they bring back the food? Is it possible to privately use several ships for that? And even if they could, the food would probably spoil by then."

Why would anyone embezzle food? They would have to bring the food to Fort Mokna

in the first place.

There is certainly some corruption happening in Fort Mokna.

From the perspective of greed, it doesn't make much sense.

However, as is the case everywhere on the continent, food is a precious resource in Edina. That's why any corruption related to food is dealt with severely.

Charlotte stared at the documents and numbers spread out before her.

"Hmm…"

Something was amiss.

To be precise, something had been amiss for a very long time.

Neither Reinhardt nor Harriet had been aware of the problem. They hadn't known that the food requests were excessively high.

Even if they had known, it wouldn't have made a difference.

Because it was a battlefield, and there might be unforeseen circumstances. They would have thought that stocking up on food was a precautionary measure.

They had trusted Liana so far.

There was no way they could have doubted her.

Charlotte wasn't suspecting Liana's corruption either.

It was just that the numbers were strange.

The figures confirmed on paper showed, on average, odd values.

If strange values had been recorded consistently for a long time, it was certain that something strange had been happening.

Reading corruption and suspicion between the numbers.

What was impossible for Reinhardt and Harriet was possible for Charlotte.

But the problem was:

This investigation involved Liana de Grantz, one of the most important people among Reinhardt's followers, who might be implicated in the corruption.

Even if there were no issues with Liana, investigating Fort Mokna meant investigating Liana's power base.

If necessary, there might even need to be punishment.

Did she have the authority for that?

"…"

That's why Charlotte had asked Reinhardt before he left.

"Clarify the extent of your authority."

Reinhardt did not request this of Charlotte, he commanded it.

"Find a way to take control."

As the Regent of Edina, Charlotte was obliged to do as Reinhardt ordered.

Investigate any corruption and carry out punishments if necessary.

If Liana refused Charlotte's instructions and commands, she would have to make her listen.

"I must go to Port Mokna."

Had Reinhardt not asked her to refrain from meddling in that area, she wouldn't have made this decision.

But since Reinhardt had ordered it, Charlotte felt she had to carry it out accurately.

In Port Mokna, the Holy Order's Knights were stationed, and Liana was the person in charge.

Their primary mission was the defense of Port Mokna, and secondly, Liana would personally lead expeditions to nearby areas to rescue refugees fleeing from monsters or hiding.

The number of people Liana had saved so far was too numerous to count.

However, Liana now believed that the strategic value of Port Mokna had significantly decreased. Therefore, she wanted to establish another base and use it as a forward base.

Indeed, initially, they were able to rescue a considerable number of refugees, but now it was becoming increasingly difficult to find survivors in the vicinity.

As a result, unlike before, no matter how much they searched and went on expeditions, less than a thousand people were being rescued.

It was a cruel fact, but it meant that almost all of those who had barely survived were now dead.

The number of people who could be saved had reached its limit, and even if they moved the base, it would be impossible to find as many survivors as before.

Port Mokna, now a losing-its-usefulness forward base.

Charlotte and Harriet arrived at Port Mokna through the mass teleportation of Lucinil, the Lord of Wednesday, who was staying in the royal capital.

"This is… Port Mokna…"

Seeing the place she had only known on paper, Charlotte felt a different kind of emotion.

A considerable number of people resided in this base, which served as a military headquarters.

However, it was more than just a residential area, with temporary housing for refugees and the core military forces stationed there.

As battles occurred daily, the city itself had a tense atmosphere.

"The refugee shelters… are almost empty."

"Yes… It's getting harder and harder to find survivors."

Charlotte's words were met with Harriet's nod.

There were quite a few refugees who had been rescued one way or another, but the number was only around two hundred.

The larger the base, the wider the defense perimeter, so the scale wasn't too extensive.

Barracks for stationed troops, a temple for the Holy Knights to pray, a smoke-filled dining hall, and a huge warehouse were among the necessary buildings in this place.

The harbor was also quite large, as it accommodated large ships coming and going.

"It's a place where corruption is impossible."

"Yeah, so…"

Only after seeing it with her own eyes did Charlotte vaguely feel that there was no room for corruption here.

Lucinil, the Lord of Wednesday who had accompanied them for the teleportation, was also quietly observing the scenery of Port Mokna.

"I'll be back after finishing my work. I'm going to take a walk around here."

"Yes, my lord."

With that, Lucinil began to stroll away.

At the temple, she had thought of her as a friendly junior who had become surprisingly close to Reinhardt, only to find out that she was a Vampire Lord of immeasurable age.

Charlotte and Harriet both quietly observed Lucinil's back as she became a member

of the Council of Elders.

Despite the situation.

She looked like a child, but in reality, she was a Vampire Lord.

Sometimes she would stop to think, and at other times, she would gaze blankly at something.

While absentmindedly following Lucinil's dazzling silver hair with her eyes, Charlotte seemed to recall what they had come here for, and looked straight ahead.

"There's no need to hide the fact that we're here. Let's go to the headquarters."

"Alright."

Harriet clenched her fist slightly.

It was unclear what kind of conversation would take place, but considering Liana's personality, it was certain that no kind words would be exchanged.

Thus, Charlotte's response was crucial.

"Your Highness, the Thunder Lord is currently on a mission. She is expected to return today, but the exact time is unknown."

"Then we shall wait until she returns."

Upon arriving at the headquarters, Charlotte was informed that Liana was absent. Harriet and Charlotte sat in the headquarters' reception room, waiting for Liana to return.

The thick walls surrounding Fort Mokna were guarded by knights at regular intervals. Since it was unknown when or where monsters would attack, the defensive posture had to be maintained continuously.

Being a place where most battles occurred, tension was palpable among all the troops.

Beyond commanding these troops, Liana also patrolled nearby areas periodically to exterminate monsters, and even embarked on long-distance expeditions to rescue survivors.

Charlotte was good with numbers, but she didn't think numbers were everything.

There were things that could only be understood by seeing them firsthand.

Like the overall tension of Fort Mokna, or the determination in the troops' demeanor.

Things that couldn't be expressed in numbers had to be seen with one's own eyes.

From such observations, Charlotte drew a conclusion.

"It seems Liana has too much on her plate."

Liana de Grantz's workload was quite heavy.

"That's true. So sometimes, Olivia takes over Liana's duties for a few days."

"Ah… that makes sense."

The Holy Order's leader, Olivia Lanze.

Being quite powerful herself, Olivia would sometimes step in when Liana seemed too fatigued.

"So she only gets a few days off?"

"Yeah, because Liana wants it that way… She says it's the only way she can rest and recover."

Despite there being others who could take over, Liana practically lived at Fort Mokna. Charlotte crossed her arms and stared at the scenery of Fort Mokna.

"Did Reinhardt frequently inspect Fort Mokna?"

"No, as you know… Reinhardt had so much to do that he couldn't visit Fort Mokna very often. But last time, he did go on an inspection."

Even though Reinhardt hastily built a house, he barely had time to sleep while establishing Edina's system. He even faced assassination threats.

"Hmm…"

"Why, do you see anything strange?"

"No, it's not that."

Charlotte shook her head.

"I was just thinking that, in reality, Liana has full authority over Fort Mokna…"

"Yeah, that's true. For most matters, Liana decides and resolves things here. But they still consult each other for extremely important matters."

"Extremely important matters, such as?"

"Mainly, how to transport refugees, and how to set up new operational zones, those kinds of discussions."

At Harriet's words, Charlotte nodded.

"What is the loyalty of the Fort Mokna troops towards Liana?"

"Loyalty?"

"Yes, loyalty."

At Charlotte's question, Harriet ponders in silence.

"It must be incredibly high. Liana always fights at the forefront of the battle, and I heard she tries to minimize casualties when monsters attack in the middle of the night. With a commander fighting at the front lines… how could their loyalty not be high?"

"I suppose so."

Charlotte continues to gaze out the window.

Liana de Grantz devotes all her efforts to the defense of Fort Mokna.

To avoid as many casualties as possible, she fights at the forefront. The trust and loyalty towards such a commander couldn't possibly be low.

Charlotte is convinced by Harriet's words.

"What about in comparison to Olivia Lanze?"

"Hmm?"

Caught off guard by the sudden question, Harriet couldn't help but feel slightly bewildered.

"Could the knights here be more loyal to Liana de Grantz than to the leader of the Holy Order, Olivia Lanze?"

"That… is a dangerous question, Charlotte."

It was an extremely sensitive question. After all, these knights were originally under the command of Holy Order leader Olivia Lanze, with Liana de Grantz as their commander.

If their loyalty shifted more towards Liana over time, it could become a contentious issue.

Charlotte stares at the evasive Harriet.

"I have to ask dangerous questions."

"…"

"I need to know because it's dangerous."

Reinhardt wants Charlotte to completely act on behalf of the Demon King.

Therefore, she must know everything about Edina.

One must know the dangers, no matter how sensitive the matter is.

"I don't know the specific situation at Fort Mokna or the thoughts of the knights. But… Liana has always fought for the people and worked hard to protect her soldiers. I don't know who the knights would be more loyal to between Olivia and Liana… But, if it's for Liana… I think they would be willing to risk their lives."

The extent is unknown.

But the loyalty of the knights is strong enough that they would be willing to lay down their lives.

"The Thunder King is a title the knights call her with respect and admiration."

They even give her such a title out of respect for their commander, who is much younger and only in her twenties.

“…Really?"

Charlotte nods at Harriet's response.

Harriet was afraid of Charlotte's questions, each with an unclear intention.

If Liana returns and their conversation goes awry, it could lead to significant problems. And that kind of problem could escalate into a fight.

The regency established by the Demon King.

And a potential conflict with Liana, one of the Four Heavenly Kings.

The likelihood of it becoming an irreversible event is very high.

Ultimately, the highest authority in Edina, although absent, is the Demon King Valier.

Regardless of whether there was a real issue or not, if it isn't resolved properly, the decision will have to wait until the Demon King's return.

If a problem arises and the Demon King returns, whose side will he take?

Either side presents its own set of issues.

If he sides with the regency, it will inevitably cause resentment among Liana and her

supporters, who are almost national heroes.

If he sides with Liana, the newly established regency will falter from the start. If they can't handle the hero faction properly, they won't be able to carry out their duty of fully managing Edina's politics.

"Charlotte, this is… too dangerous to meddle with."

"I know that."

At Harriet's cautious words, Charlotte simply responded while gazing out the window in silence.

The southwestern borderlands of Kernstadt.

The Sren Mountain Range.

Kwung!

I silently watched as the large tree split in half and tumbled down.

"Huff… Hah…"

Cold sweat dripped down my entire body.

I hadn't even imagined there would be a monster disguised as a tree.

I had just intended to climb up and get some rest, but the tree tried to swallow me whole and devour me as soon as I closed my eyes.

I managed to protect myself with the release of my magical power, and by explosively discharging it, I could break free by destroying the middle part of the large tree. However, I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if I had actually fallen asleep.

It had been about two weeks since I entered the Sren Mountain Range.

I hadn't been able to catch a wink of sleep.

And I still hadn't found Rezaira.

CHAPTER 478

It was deep into the night when the Thunder King, Liana de Grantz, returned to Fort Mokna.

Charlotte watched the knights and priests return to Fort Mokna from within the command center.

Somehow, they had found survivors, and quite a few carriages followed the troops from behind.

When they discovered survivors, they would escort them safely back to Fort Mokna by loading them onto the carriages.

Not all the carriages were filled with people, but some could be seen carrying passengers.

And at the very end of the troops, there she was - Liana de Grantz, riding her white horse, guarding the rear of the battalion.

She led the vanguard in battle and took charge of the rear during escort missions.

It was no wonder her soldiers respected a commander who always fought in the most dangerous positions.

The carriages carrying survivors were unloaded at the temporary refugee housing area, and the people moved according to the troops' direction. They would first calm the frightened people, educate them briefly about Edina, and then send them to Edina on transport convoys.

This was the alpha and omega of the Fort Mokna forward base operations.

Harriet muttered blankly as she watched the survivors disembark from the carriages.

"Still… there are quite a few."

This was Liana's mission - to continuously scout and bring back survivors.

External operations could end within a day, but sometimes they would take several days, venturing far away.

The environment made it difficult to find survivors, and although they were considering relocating the base, they could still find survivors nearby. The numbers were just significantly lower than before.

Charlotte couldn't tell how long Liana had been away on her mission, but the survivors they had found numbered over twenty.

These people, rescued from a miserable life, were still trembling with fear even though they had arrived at a safe place. Charlotte quietly watched their faces.

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"What's going on without any explanation?"

Upon returning to the command center, Liana cocked her head when she heard that Charlotte and Harriet had been waiting for her until midnight.

"Whatever it is, just wait a bit, let me wash up."

Charlotte didn't have much time to spare either.

She didn't yet know if there were any problems at Fort Mokna and, in fact, it might be nothing. However, she folded her work for now and stayed there because Liana might be involved in the issue.

That's why she needed to finish her duties as soon as possible and leave.

But Charlotte quietly observed Liana's behavior, which seemed as if she had encountered something unpleasant.

'Is it a fight? No, it can't be.'

As soon as she thought that, Charlotte shook her head internally.

During their time at the temple, she and Liana weren't very close, but that didn't

mean they didn't know each other at all.

Liana de Grantz.

The young heir of the Grantz Duchy and a top-class lightning user among those with supernatural abilities focused on attack.

After the death of the Duke of Grantz, her abilities had grown several dimensions stronger.

Charlotte knew that Liana's personality was generally outgoing, and she didn't pay much attention to trivial matters. At this point, Liana would hate the Empire, so her feelings towards Charlotte couldn't be good.

Liana would just say what needed to be said.

Her personality wasn't one to suppress others through subtle psychological warfare.

Liana de Grantz was a different breed of person from Olivia Lanze.

While Olivia Lanze would make snide remarks and subtly belittle her opponents, Liana would just bluntly say if she disliked someone.

So, her actions now were likely done without much thought.

Even if it were not Charlotte but Reinhardt in this place, she would have told him to wait while she washed up.

Harriet was tense, not knowing what was going to unfold.

How much time had passed?

Liana, having changed from her military uniform to casual clothes, emerged in the reception room.

Had she not had a proper meal until now? Liana began to nibble on a plate of sandwiches the lieutenant had brought, placing it on the table.

Chewing on a sandwich, Liana stared intently at Charlotte.

"So, what is it?"

Liana was direct from the start. She couldn't feign politeness or beat around the bush; that just wasn't her nature.

Being overly direct could easily make enemies.

However, Liana always led the charge in battle precisely because she was direct in both her actions and her demeanor.

In this unique environment, Liana had gained the absolute trust of most of Fort Mokna's forces, thanks to her seemingly abrasive attitude.

"I've heard it's difficult to find survivors, but it seems there are still people left."

Harriet quietly observed Charlotte's trembling voice.

The direct Liana.

Charlotte, who didn't immediately address the issue at hand.

Only Harriet, watching the situation, felt that the two were very different people.

Liana took a sip of water and sighed.

"Well, it's not like there are none. It's a bit of a crude expression, but you could say the pickings are slim. The efficiency is low. So, we're planning to move the base. You know about that, right?"

"Yeah, I heard you're planning to move the base to another port."

"Why, do you think Fort Mokna should continue to operate? Because there are still survivors in this vicinity?"

At Liana's question, Charlotte shook her head.

"No, I'm sure your judgment as the field commander is the most accurate. Since you've seen and experienced so much, your opinion must be right."

"Actually, whether moving the base will allow us to rescue more people is just a

prediction. I don't really know what the outcome will be. And to establish a new base, we'll have to clear out all the monsters in the area. It's dangerous, but we can't afford to stay put here."

We have to save more people.

Liana had only shared her opinion and intended to act according to Reinhardt's principles.

People respected and admired Liana.

Liana was far removed from selfish desires.

Her decision to abandon the relatively safe Fort Mokna and establish a new, riskier base proved that she was not driven by petty ambitions.

"How many people are in the refugee residential area right now?"

"Well, I don't know the exact number, but I think it's about 150, including those we rescued today."

When the next transport ship takes them to Lazak, they will become citizens of Edina.

"On average, how many days do survivors stay here before being transported to Lazak?"

"Well, that's not really about how long the refugees stay here. It's more important when the transport fleet, which comes every three weeks, arrives. If the transport fleet arrives the day after picking up the survivors, they stay for three weeks. If they arrived a week ago, they stay for a week, and so on."

"I see."

Charlotte nodded at Liana's words and then fell silent, lost in thought for a moment.

Having finished her thoughts, Charlotte asked again.

"How many people were on the last transport fleet?"

"Hmm? I think it was about eighteen hundred."

"And before that?"

"Huh."

Liana narrowed her eyes at Charlotte's question.

Charlotte looked at Liana without any change in expression.

"What are you getting at?"

“…What do you mean?"

Liana glared at Charlotte without hiding her discomfort.

"Why are you asking me about such trivial numbers? They're just numbers written in a report, after all. Why did you come all the way here to ask about them?"

Liana put down the sandwich she had been eating, crossed her arms, and stared at Charlotte.

"Get to the point. What is it? Why are you here?"

At Liana's hostile gaze, Charlotte calmly looked back at her.

"Hmm…”

Charlotte had deliberately stirred the pot to gauge her counterpart's attitude towards her – whether it was friendly, hostile, or neutral.

But she couldn't stand the few indirect remarks and asked directly.

Liana was straightforward and didn't like Charlotte. Charlotte realized that her assumption was correct.

"According to my calculations, I think Port Mokna is claiming more food than they actually need."

“…What?"

"It seems that they've been doing this for quite a while. About a year, give or take."

Liana's expression hardened at Charlotte's words. Harriet's eyes widened in surprise.

Charlotte figured out when Port Mokna had started claiming excessive food just by looking at a few documents.

The basic food requirement for Port Mokna is for two thousand people.

The additional amount of food required is determined by the number of survivors residing here.

For about a year, Port Mokna has been claiming excessive food.

"Food is a serious issue, especially for soldiers about to go into battle. They need to eat well and have high-quality meals. Up until now, Edina's situation required minimal supplies, but we wanted to accommodate better meals at least. Is that really a big deal? Is it something you need to investigate to this extent? Do we, who fight on the front lines, have to listen to this just because we've eaten a bit more?"

At Liana's hostile words, Charlotte nodded quietly.

"Yes, I thought you'd say something like that."

“…What?"

Liana's expression grew colder at Charlotte's nonchalant response.

Liana was blunt. Thus, her words often revealed clues.

Charlotte had already obtained one such clue.

"I understand that you were aware of this issue and that it was done under your direction."

Only then did Liana bite her lip, realizing that she had been caught by Charlotte.

Clues often slipped out between words, and Charlotte was adept at catching them.

Liana, on the other hand, had no talent for it.

"Yes, I did it. So what? Is it really that big of an issue?"

"You wanted to provide better-quality meals for the soldiers' morale, right?"

"Yes."

"But that's not really it, is it?"

“…What do you mean?"

Charlotte calmly began to explain.

"You said you provided more food for the soldiers' morale, but if that were the case, you would have requested higher-quality meals instead of larger quantities. Therefore, you would have needed more meat and processed products. But what you claimed in excess wasn't meat or processed meat, but basic items like flour."

"…”

"You wanted not the quality of the meals but the quantity."

The expression of Liana de Grantz grew increasingly rigid.

With an impassive face, Charlotte calmly explained.

Harriet, who was watching, felt an oppressive sensation in her throat as if something was stuck.

Liana said she had tried to improve the quality of the meals.

But according to Charlotte, while the quantity of food had increased, the quality had not.

Charlotte didn't tell everything she knew from the beginning.

She waited for the other person's mistake and then, as if she had been waiting, she brought out another fact she knew, cornering her opponent.

She caught her opponent with their own words.

"Considering Edina's situation, I thought it was important to feed them well. It's hard to get meat, so we tried to fill the quantity with basic food like…"

"The supplies that were originally distributed were calculated for the necessary nutrition of the combat forces, equivalent to two servings for an ordinary person. So there was no reason to supply more flour or rice. They couldn't even eat it all. No matter how much they ate, Port Mokna's forces couldn't consume the excessively claimed supplies from the beginning."

Bang!

Liana slammed the table roughly, glaring at Charlotte.

Spark! Sparkle!

Electric sparks flew from Liana's forehead as she glared at Charlotte with a ferocious gaze.

"What are you trying to say?"

Charlotte still looked calm, gazing at Liana.

"It's simple. There were more mouths to feed here than the number of people actually reported to Edina."

"More…?"

Harriet asked, sensing a bad premonition.

"…"

Liana remained silent.

Charlotte continued speaking.

"For a few days, or even weeks. Food was needed in larger quantities because they still had to be fed somehow, but for some reason, they never made it to Edina. Many of the survivors who were actually here couldn't make it to Port Mokna. That's why

more food was claimed than was actually needed. It was for the unrecorded people to eat."

At Charlotte's words, Liana fell silent.

"You."

Charlotte asked quietly.

"What did you do with those people?"

"…"

"What did you do with the people who couldn't come to Edina when they should have?"

Liana glared at Charlotte, remaining silent.

How long was the silence?

Charlotte knew Liana was not a person driven by trivial desires.

In that case, the excessive claim for food must have been necessary.

There must have been a reason to hide it and lie, a need for deception.

There must have been a truth that could not be spoken.

With a stern expression, Liana slowly opened her mouth.

“…I killed them."

"What, what did you say?!"

Harriet was shocked by Liana's words, breaking the silence.

"I couldn't endanger Edina any longer."

"…"

As if she had anticipated it, Charlotte quietly nodded.

CHAPTER 479

Lucinil walked quietly near Port Mokna as night fell.

The Archdemon.

A new world created by the Demon King Valier.

A landscape where humans and demons coexist.

Lucinil never thought such a thing could be possible.

She believed that the long-standing hatred between humans and demons couldn't be resolved.

However, survival was ultimately an absolute issue for all beings.

The environmental limitations of an island.

The reality that the continent was teeming with monsters.

The reality that they had to choose between death or coexistence created this bizarre landscape where humans and demons lived together.

Lucinil felt a sad realization that such a thing was only possible after the world had come close to destruction.

The fact that such a scene had been created in the end evoked a strange wave of emotion in Lucinil.

The reasons and causes were complex, and Valier, who had created this environment, was also the cause of this situation.

However, in that situation, he persevered and tried to accomplish something. And in the end, he achieved something.

Therefore, Lucinil felt a mix of sadness, pride, and dignity.

It was an outer area beyond the fort walls.

There were no monsters roaming around, as if they were swept away periodically.

But even if there were roaming monsters, Lucinil was a Vampire Lord.

There could be no monster threatening Lucinil in such a change.

Thus, Lucinil walked through the outskirts of Port Mokna, observing the changed world.

In fact, it didn't seem to have changed that much.

It wasn't as if humans densely populated every corner of the continent, nor were monsters rampant everywhere.

All Lucinil saw was a moonlit landscape, with a gentle breeze blowing across the plains.

In a world close to destruction, the silver-haired vampire walked quietly through a scene that made him wonder what had really changed.

Reinhardt had disappeared in search of something.

The regent who filled his void was doing her best to fulfill her role.

The many relationships the Demon King had formed changed into peculiar bonds mediated by guilt.

Lucinil quietly contemplated Valier's appearance, which seemed unchanged but had changed too much in a short time.

As if there was an obsession with not showing any weakness.

The subtly cute charm had disappeared.

His existence had become the starting point of a tragedy, so the Demon King's heart must be broken.

However, nothing of the sort could be seen outwardly.

He didn't reveal his true feelings at all.

Feeling that he couldn't show even a hint of comfort, his heart seemed closed off, fearing that if he started to reveal his emotions, there would be no end.

As if he had a premonition that an even more miserable fate would befall him now that things had come to this.

Yet he acted as if he had to do something.

"Poor guy…"

Lucinil murmured to himself.

The Demon King had become stronger.

He merely pretended to be strong while hiding his shattered heart behind a thick curtain.

Although he didn't tell anyone where he was heading, the Demon King must have left to somehow overcome the fate given to him.

He could run like a tireless horse.

Lucinil had seen many such beings.

She had seen those who ran like tireless horses and achieved something.

However, she had seen even more of those who, at the end of their run, became exhausted and died.

Lucinil didn't know whether the fate approaching the Demon King would be a path to exhaustion and death, or a path to accomplishment.

However, the Demon King raced on, gritting his teeth and not revealing his broken self to anyone.

Having experienced a tremendous failure, he was determined not to fall apart, even if it meant being stubborn.

It wasn't that he had grown stronger, but rather, it bordered on obsession.

What could the Demon King be doing?

Where in which world could that pitiful fellow be wandering?

Having escaped from Edina's grasp, the Demon King seemed to have been waiting to head somewhere.

Lucinil stopped walking through the plains as night fell, suddenly halting her steps.

-Hisssssss

From somewhere, a chilling wind blew.

"…?"

Lucinil gazed at the moonlit hills.

Lucinil was a Vampire Lord.

Vampires were essentially undead.

Though they should be dead, they were living beings.

Therefore, though Lucinil lacked a soul, it was easier for her to sense spiritual entities compared to other living beings.

And Lucinil had researched souls more than any other being in the world.

As such, her ability to sense spiritual beings was far superior to that of other vampires.

A strange uneasiness emanated from the wind.

Lucinil could intuit that it was some sort of spiritual reaction.

Taking a deep breath, Lucinil focused her mind.

-Huhuhuhu…

-Uuuuuuuu…

Lucinil could read the strange cries and despair that blended with the wind.

Ghosts.

Ghosts entwined themselves around the Vampire Council. They couldn't affect living beings, but some spirits were attached to the very land itself.

Lucinil walked slowly toward the place where the eerie cries echoed, traversing the hills.

This was different from the monsters of the Gate.

This was a phenomenon native to this world.

Yet the eerie cries, as if the wind itself were wailing, drew Lucinil toward a certain place as if he were bewitched.

"What… is this?"

Lucinil could feel what other beings could not.

The anguished voices of despairing and vengeful ghosts painfully resonated in her ears.

She was in an outlying area far from Fort Mokna.

Beneath a massive rock in the midst of the rolling hills.

A huge, deep pit that seemed artificially created.

It was a cliff so cleverly hidden that it would be impossible to find unless one deliberately sought it.

Lucinil sensed that the eerie cries came from within that artificially created cave.

Below that pit.

Lucinil saw something dark writhing there.

It wasn't moving.

-Huhuhuhu…

-Uuuuuuuuuu…

But she could sense countless ghosts that couldn't leave this place, no matter how immense their grudges.

Narrowing her brows, Lucinil summoned a sphere of light and threw it down into the pit.

It was a pit so deep that its depth was unfathomable.

Only then could Lucinil see what the dark things below the pit were.

"What… what is this…?"

All of them.

They were the charred remains of human corpses.

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Liana had secured more survivors than she had reported to Edina.

However, she didn't send a considerable number of them to Edina. They remained undocumented and became nonexistent people.

They were murdered by Liana.

Hearing this, Harriet couldn't help but be shocked, while Charlotte stared at Liana with a dispassionate gaze.

"I thought you would find out eventually, but I didn't expect you to catch on so soon. And not Reinhardt, but you."

Up until now, neither Harriet nor Reinhardt had any inkling of what Charlotte had inferred simply by examining a few documents. They were entirely in the dark about what had transpired.

Regardless of her personal feelings toward Charlotte, Liana couldn't help but acknowledge her undeniable abilities.

"Liana… what are you talking about? Why… why did you… the people…?"

Charlotte remained silent, but the shock that Harriet experienced was immense.

All this time, without any report, Liana had been killing the survivors with her own hands.

If that were true, Liana would be both the savior of the most people in Edina and the one who had massacred countless innocents.

Liana stared quietly at the pale-faced Harriet.

"Reinhardt, he has had many close calls with death, hasn't he?"

"…"

Assassination attempts on the Demon King were not a rare occurrence. Reinhardt had nearly died on multiple occasions, and sharing a bedroom with Harriet was a recent precaution for this very reason.

"We can't allow any more impure elements into Edina."

In fact, there were countless people in Edina who despised the Demon King and wanted him dead.

However, up until now, they had managed to suppress them by force alone.

Moreover, it was impossible to predict how the demons, who were coexisting with humans under the rule of the Demon King, would react if he were to be eliminated.

Liana stared intently at Harriet.

"If we educate the refugees about the situation in Edina, do you know what would happen?"

"…"

"Do you think there would be anyone who, upon hearing about a society ruled by the Demon King and living alongside demons, would not prefer death to living in such a place?"

It wasn't just a simple opposition.

These people had lost something.

A nation governed by the very cause of their suffering, the Demon King.

There were those who would rather choose death than live in a place ruled by such a being.

There were those who despised the Demon King enough to want him dead.

But beyond that, there were those who hated the Demon King so much that they would prefer death to living under his rule.

Harriet's lips trembled with despair.

"Liana… just because they feel that way… does it mean… they need to be killed…?"

"Then what?"

Liana stared at Harriet.

"If they would rather die than go to Edina, forcing them there would put Reinhardt in danger. Do you think it's only Reinhardt? Harriet, you've had many close calls too. I may not like her, but Olivia is in the same boat. I don't want to fill Edina with extremist elements. But we can't send them there without education either. That could cause problems. With their numbers already growing into a significant force, do you think I should send even more people who might overthrow Edina? I can't do that. And if I don't send them? Should I feed and support them here for the rest of their lives? I can't do that either. Should I just drive them out to fend for themselves?"

The people they had saved would be cast out once again, back to the wastelands where monsters roamed.

Driven back to a land of nothing but death.

Death or exile.

"That's right, in the past, I actually drove them away like that. If they wanted to die so badly, I didn't want to dirty my hands, so I told them to go out and die. That's how I drove a considerable number of survivors back into the wilderness."

"I thought that as long as they somehow survived, everything would be fine. But you know what happened? Some of them actually did survive, and that's the real problem."

"Rumors are spreading about a place like this in the south. The rumors are likely spreading through the people I expelled."

"What do you think will happen if this reaches the Empire?"

"If the Empire learns about Fort Mokna, and that we've settled on a distant island in the south, what do you think will happen when the humans find out?"

"War, undoubtedly."

"I made a mistake. I made a huge mistake by expelling people who opposed Reinhardt and chose death over living under the Demon King's rule. I made the mistake of letting them live, knowing about our land and our territory."

"Ever since then, I've tried not to make such a mistake."

"That's all there is to it."

The problem wasn't that the expelled people died; it was that they lived.

Rumors about Fort Mokna began to spread from somewhere. People were gradually learning about the southern paradise, even though it wasn't known as the Demon King's land.

The Demon King, the symbol of hatred, and his realm.

Humanity's attack on Edina may begin someday.

If a large number of people learn about Edina, the Empire may be forced into war with them.

Just as they were pushed to execute the princess.

The wavering Empire might have to wage war against Darkland to restore its authority and unite humanity.

That's why Liana began to actually kill those who would rather choose death over living under the Demon King's rule.

Because if they lived, all of Edina might be in danger.

CHAPTER 480

"I haven't tried not persuading them. I've even tried to persuade them with lies. But even if I send them to Edina, they will eventually find out the truth."

"I don't know what you two think about it."

"People hate the Demon King much more than we can imagine."

"It's common to hate him enough to want to kill him."

"And even to hate him enough to want to die."

Both Harriet and Charlotte knew that people hated the Demon King enough to want to kill him.

But they could also hate him enough to want to die.

Saving someone could bring about someone else's death.

Killing someone to save another.

Killing someone to protect something.

They had to kill those they had somehow saved with their own hands.

Liana had been hiding this story for a very long time.

Since about a year ago.

As a result of sending those who were clearly going to become dissenters to Edina, there have been numerous assassination attempts on the Demon King.

In the long run, Edina could be overthrown as the extreme opposition to the Demon King grew.

From the moment she realized that information about Port Mokna and Edina was

spreading.

Liana had been actually killing people who would rather die than live under the Demon King's rule.

There was an unbreakable, unwavering determination in Liana's stern expression.

No sorrow, no despair.

Knowing that if she started getting entangled in such things, she would only flounder in bottomless despair.

It only showed that she had decided not to think about such things.

"Whatever truth you wanted to know, this is it."

Liana says, looking at Charlotte.

"So, what are you going to do now?"

Charlotte looks silently at Liana.

"Why didn't you tell Reinhardt about this problem?"

In response to Charlotte's question, Liana crosses her arms.

"Do you know how Reinhardt has been for the past two years?"

"I don't."

At Charlotte's calm answer, Liana narrows her eyes and looks out the window.

"He never showed any sign of struggle, not even once."

"…"

"The one who should have struggled the most among us spent those two years without any hint of it. Just thinking about what he had to do, moving forward, and never taking a break."

Liana looks silently at Charlotte.

"He thinks it's because of him that things turned out this way. But the fact that he doesn't say anything makes it more obvious. He's struggling so much that he can't even speak."

"…"

When you save someone, you kill someone else just as much.

"If Reinhardt had known about this, he would have said that he would take care of the assassination threats and internal problems and to just send them to Edina."

"I don't want Reinhardt to suffer from such things anymore."

"I won't say that this was the best choice."

"But."

"I don't think it was the worst choice either."

"Do you think I don't know that there are only crappy choices to solve this problem in any way? That's why I made a decision as the Demon King's vice-commander and the commander in charge of the front lines. I decided that Reinhardt should never know about this problem. I have no intention of burdening him with greater concerns and agony by letting him know about this problem when he's already obviously rotting inside."

Liana didn't want to give the Demon King, who was already clearly struggling enough, another cause for concern.

Liana didn't want Reinhardt or Edina to be in danger.

So, out of those she had managed to save, she actually killed those who hated the Demon King enough to want to die.

The rumors of the massacre that took place here did not reach Edina. Liana had dealt with people secretly, so even the survivors who went to Edina did not know who had disappeared from their surroundings.

Thus.

Liana saved people, and because she saved them, she killed them.

Ironically, those who were not discovered by Liana might have lived a little longer.

Liana did not explain at all how she felt when killing them with her own hands.

Just as Reinhardt had not shown any signs of strain for two years.

Liana did not speak of the inevitability or pain of the slaughter.

She decided to do so, and so she did.

The unyielding Liana de Grantz.

The demon king's changer.

Charlotte gazes at the Thunder King.

"You're Reinhardt's friend, aren't you?"

Charlotte asks Liana, still with a calm expression.

"Yes."

"But before that, you're aware that you were in a relationship of lord and retainer?"

“…Yes."

Before being friends, they had to consider their lord and retainer relationship first.

Although they started as friends, Liana could not argue with Charlotte's words that they had to abandon that way of thinking to some extent. Charlotte gazes at Liana quietly.

"A retainer deceives the lord for the lord's sake. Is that the argument?"

Although it excessively simplifies Liana and Reinhardt's situations, it is true that their situations are not much different in the end.

"Yes. I guess that's one way to put it."

"Then, does that mean Harriet here, and me as the ruler, Olivia as the head of the church, and Airi as the Succubus Queen can also deceive the lord under the same argument?"

"…"

"To ease the lord's burden and relieve the lord's sense of responsibility and guilt, the lord must be unaware of the miserable and dirty things happening in the country. Is it okay to deceive the lord?"

Charlotte looks at Liana quietly.

"By deceiving the lord and covering the lord's eyes under the pretext of working for the lord, showing only the good, beautiful, and heartwarming things while hiding the dirty things, and if the lord remains ignorant, thinking that everything is going well, what do you call such a lord?"

"A tyrant, isn't it?"

Liana looks at Charlotte with a stern expression.

"Liana de Grantz."

"Your intention may be that of a loyal retainer, but the result is the way of a traitor."

"The moment you try to blind the lord with various considerations, you unintentionally turn Reinhardt into an incompetent being."

"Reinhardt will inevitably trust you and won't be curious about what's hidden behind your words. Why? Because you're a meritorious retainer, and a friend."

"Regardless of your intentions, you carried out a unilateral decision without discussing a major issue with the lord. For a very long time."

"Reinhardt trusted you, but you doubted whether he could fall apart."

"Ultimately, you betrayed Reinhardt's trust."

"I don't intend to argue whether your handling of this matter was wrong."

"But you should have talked to Reinhardt about this issue, absolutely."

"That's your mistake and your failure."

Regardless of the intentions, once the lord is deceived, it can happen two or three times.

Liana, who has also deceived the lord, cannot say anything to others who deceive the lord for similar reasons.

And so.

If it was assumed that each person following Reinhardt had one or two matters they were keeping hidden for Reinhardt's sake.

Reinhardt was an incompetent ruler, unknowing of the very matters he should be aware of. Charlotte looked silently at the quiet Liana.

One could be friends, but one should not approach matters from a friend's perspective.

Liana knew that Charlotte's words were not merely to confirm the hierarchy.

"A ruler needs your loyalty, not your consideration."

One could keep a friend in the dark out of consideration, but keeping a ruler in the dark for the same reason was no different from treason.

"The issues and responsibilities arising from good and evil in the nation are for the ruler to bear. You cannot and should not judge from below, then act as you please, deciding to take responsibility for yourself."

"…"

In Charlotte's words, all of this essentially turned Reinhardt into an incompetent ruler.

Intention was not important; if such events accumulated, they would only turn

Reinhardt into a tyrant.

Liana could not find a response to that.

She had no choice but to admit that her choice, regardless of good or evil, was a mistake that jeopardized not only the relationship between the military and the ruler, but also Reinhardt's ability as a ruler.

"So, what do you want to say in the end? Do you want to dismiss me from my position? Or do you want to tell Reinhardt that I have committed corruption and punishment is necessary?"

Liana calmly replied to Charlotte's words, admitting her mistake, albeit begrudgingly.

"I didn't know the specifics, but I thought there would be something similar. What I want to say is that from now on, no matter the reason, there must be no more secrets of this kind."

Liana did not mention that she had been slaughtering survivors until now.

The important thing was that she had acted unilaterally without discussing matters that should be discussed with the ruler.

Charlotte was merely pointing out the problems that would arise from it.

"I will report this matter to Reinhardt. However, knowing Reinhardt's personality, I don't think he would punish you or dismiss you from your position."

"…"

"And this is my judgment as a regent."

Charlotte looked around.

"Until Reinhardt returns and issues a command, it would be best to suspend the search for survivors in Fort Mokna."

The possibility of securing survivors was not entirely gone.

However, securing survivors would inevitably lead to the slaughter of some of them.

There could be a choice to continue the search for survivors, as some can be saved.

But there could also be a choice not to save anyone, as one might have to kill an innocent person.

There was no entirely right decision.

There were only decisions.

"From now on, all activities other than base defense will be suspended."

Fort Mokna would limit its activities to base defense until Reinhardt made a new judgment.

That was the new decision of Charlotte de Gardias, the regent.

"Can you accept my decision?"

At Charlotte's question, Liana stared silently at her.

In the end, Liana had no choice but to admit her mistake.

“…….Alright, let's do that."

And so, she had no choice but to accept the regent's judgment.

Having finished the conversation, Charlotte stood up from her seat, and Harriet awkwardly followed her.

"Hey."

Liana called out to Charlotte, who was about to leave.

“…Yes?"

"You know that I don't like you, right?"

"…”

Upon hearing Liana's words, spoken softly, Charlotte gazed quietly at her.

"I have no reason to like you and every reason to dislike you. That's what I've been thinking."

And yet, Charlotte simply stared at Liana as if to say, "So what?"

"Have you never considered that?"

“…What?"

Liana bit her lip, her eyes wide open.

Before she knew it, Liana's bulging eyes had turned bloodshot.

After a long silence, Liana mumbled as if spitting something out.

"That I have no right… to hate you… and the Empire… Have you never thought of that?"

"…”

Charlotte looked at Liana, whose eyes were bloodshot and red.

At Liana, whose empty gaze seemed to stretch out endlessly.

She just looked at her.

Liana knew the cause of her father's death.

The Empire had killed Liana's father, Duke Grantz. And they had blamed it on the Demon King.

The reason was that Duke Grantz was a key figure in the revolutionary forces.

The revolutionary forces could have plunged the entire continent into the whirlwind of war.

In fact, the place where Duke Grantz had been was known to be a meeting place with the demon race.

The revolutionary forces were willing to join hands with the enemies of humanity if

it meant achieving their revolution.

To avoid war.

The Empire had killed Duke Grantz and disguised it as the act of the Demon King to avoid countless sacrifices.

That's why Liana hated the Empire, and hated everyone involved in her father's death.

She disliked Charlotte because she was a princess of the Empire.

But now.

For the sake of Edina.

To avoid war with the Empire.

For the sake of the Demon King.

She had killed innocent people.

Liana's confession to Charlotte was tantamount to admitting that she was tormented by the thought that she had no right to hate the Empire and the royal family.

The logic behind the Empire killing Duke Grantz.

The logic behind Liana's massacre of innocents was exactly the same.

The logic was the same because it was to avoid further sacrifices.

Liana now knew that her hatred had lost its legitimacy.

Just as Reinhardt had not appealed to his despair, Liana too had been tormented by despair while committing such horrible acts with her own hands.

"Well…"

The right to hate.

The right to despise.

"I don't know if there's a need for qualifications in hatred and resentment."

Hatred and resentment can arise even with weak grounds.

After all, isn't people's hatred and resentment towards the Demon King based on mere misunderstandings?

"So even if you continue to hate me, or hate the Empire, it can't be helped. Thinking about whether you have the right to do so…"

Charlotte gazed quietly at Liana.

"The very act of worrying about the moral purity of hatred and resentment… is, well…"

Charlotte tilted her head.

"Isn't it a bit too arrogant?"

That the previous hatred and resentment were morally pure, but now they might not be justified.

At Charlotte's suggestion that worrying about that itself might be arrogant, Liana bit her lip.

"I still don't like you."

At Liana's reaction, Charlotte let out a faint laugh.

"There's no point in getting along too well with important people like kings anyway. For my sake, for your sake, and for Reinhardt's."

So it would be better for her to be considered as an unwelcome and uncomfortable person who couldn't be ignored by them.

"However, no matter what, you people are incomparably better than me, and that won't change."

The people who had believed in Reinhardt.

And herself, who couldn't believe.

Charlotte knew all too well that she could never bridge that gap.

Leaving those words behind, Charlotte left the Port Mokna headquarters.

CHAPTER 481

The power of a regent must be strong.

However, if the regent becomes too close to the Demon King's people, the kingdom's affairs would be managed without the Demon King's involvement. If the regent gains even more trust, the Demon King would become insignificant.

Charlotte understands that she can control Edina, but forming excessively close relationships with important figures could be dangerous.

Charlotte believes that she is merely a stand-in for the king and should not become the king herself.

This is not exactly what Reinhardt wants.

Of course, Charlotte doesn't think that she can earn more trust from the Four Heavenly Kings and the Council of Elders than Reinhardt just because she wants to.

She cannot gauge the time they have spent building their trust.

She remains cautious of such situations but does not think that either Olivia or Liana would trust her more than Reinhardt.

To them, the regent must be an uncomfortable yet indispensable presence.

Neither too weak nor too strong a power is acceptable.

Charlotte finds herself walking a tightrope of power.

Just before returning to Lazak from Port Mokna.

"Guys, I think there's something you need to know…"

"Something we need to know?"

"Yes."

Lucinil had no choice but to tell Charlotte and Harriet about the strange sight she had seen.

Upon hearing the story, Charlotte and Harriet could not help but understand what Lucinil was talking about.

"Ah, that place must be…"

"Probably…"

"What is it? What happened?"

Charlotte hesitated for a moment before briefly explaining to Lucinil what had happened in Lazak.

"Ah…"

Only then did Lucinil understand what she had seen.

Charlotte wore an emotionless expression, while Lucinil and Harriet could not hide their sorrow.

After a moment's consideration, Lucinil finally let out a long sigh.

"We have to do something about it."

"For now, we've decided to suspend the search for survivors."

"No, that's not it."

Lucinil pointed to the outskirts of Port Mokna.

"Anyone with enough spiritual sensitivity can feel an intense ghostly energy on their skin."

"Ghostly energy…?"

At Harriet's question, Lucinil nodded.

"Yes, ghosts may materialize as undead, or unknown curses may befall us, or even

some bizarre phenomena may occur."

Too many deaths had accumulated too many resentful spirits in this area. Nobody knows how many people have died so far.

"We have to do something before it becomes unmanageable."

"What will happen if we don't?"

At Charlotte's question, Lucinil shook her head.

"I don't know."

But her expression was grave.

"That's what makes it even scarier."

Disasters caused by resentful spirits.

A world filled with oppressive deaths everywhere.

No one knew what would happen if they didn't act quickly.

—----

Using a teleport scroll, they could return to Edina, rest for a few days, and come back.

However, teleport scrolls are not infinite. A single scroll could not take them back to Edina due to the distance limitations.

Harriet, sleepless for days, could barely create a teleport scroll after much effort.

They could not waste them recklessly, considering Harriet. If the scrolls were exhausted thoughtlessly, Harriet would be the one to suffer.

Monsters appeared in the Sren Mountain Range as frequently as they did throughout the continent.

Even so, due to the excessively treacherous terrain, the monsters that made their way here were of a completely different caliber compared to the common creatures

wandering the wilderness.

As the terrain was so harsh, only the most formidable beings could enter.

For this reason, there was a constant risk of being attacked while asleep, which left me unable to sleep at all.

I had been awake for a full fortnight.

This alone made me feel as though I had become some sort of transcendent being, far removed from ordinary humans.

Not that I wanted to realize that in this kind of situation.

However, no matter how extraordinary my physical abilities were compared to those of ordinary people, a mountain range was still a mountain range.

Scaling rocky cliffs and climbing steep slopes, traversing the bitterly cold mountains at night had its limits.

Where on earth was Rezaira?

Entering the mountain range in search of a single village was like trying to find a tiny oasis in the vast desert.

Was it all in vain?

No, it was definitely in vain.

"Phew…”

I climbed up a rocky peak and gazed upon the endless mountain range.

Looking at the mountains that seemed to have once been a vast, undulating ocean that had suddenly solidified, I could only think that the moment I would find Rezaira might never come.

If I had known this, I would have accompanied Ellen when she went to her hometown.

Despite being a hero's descendant, I even had the absurd thought that if one were to spend their childhood playing in such an atrocious terrain, they might become a Ragan Artorius.

I didn't think Rezaira had been destroyed by monsters.

But if Rezaira still existed, how were they dealing with the monsters?

It was entirely possible that the people of Rezaira had left to find a new settlement.

In that case, my wandering through the Sren Mountains was nothing more than a fruitless endeavor.

I was so angry I could burst; should I set the place ablaze? As long as I had the Flames of Tuesday, I could set the entire mountain range on fire.

Then, the bothersome monsters would either be burned to death or flee somewhere else.

"…”

Of course, if I were to do that, Ellen's mother would try to kill me on sight.

Feeling so helpless, I had all sorts of crazy thoughts.

I climbed down from the rock and continued on my way.

I was tired.

I wanted to sleep.

-Screeeeech!

However, a flying monster appeared out of nowhere and swooped down toward me.

"Seriously?"

-Groooooooowl!

I gripped the Tiamata I had summoned in my right hand and threw it with all my

might.

-Sssssss! Kaboom!

The Tiamata, which flew towards the airborne monster, released a torrent of divine power in mid-air, instantly causing the creature to explode.

"Phew."

With the scattered blood of the exploded monster behind me, I descended the mountain.

Rezaira.

Where on earth are you?

—---

Three more days passed.

Due to my lack of proper sleep, my sense of time was dulled to the point that I almost forgot where I was and what I was doing.

The preserved food I had brought with me had run out, so I hunted beasts to eat.

At least I didn't have to worry about making a fire, thanks to the Flames of Tuesday.

At this rate, even if I found Rezaira, I would be in such a state that I wouldn't even know what it was. Around that time, I climbed up a cliff.

There was a crevice in the cliff just large enough for one person to squeeze into.

I crawled in there and fell asleep.

Letting things be as they may.

When I reached the brink of death, I held onto the belief that my instincts would wake me up.

It was a reckless act, but I had no choice – if I didn't sleep, I might die.

I had no idea how long I slept.

I didn't know if I slept for hours or days, but the important thing was that I didn't die.

I crawled out of a crevice, descended a cliff, and found a stream to drink from.

Monsters emerged ceaselessly.

There were no fatal monsters, but they were no pushovers either.

There were some as large as a house, some as big as a deer, and some that flew.

Thankfully, I could dispatch the ones that were almost ethereal and immune to physical attacks with my divine weapon.

I lost track of how many peaks I crossed.

I was wandering through the heart of the Sren Mountain Range.

Where on earth was this place called Rezaira, and was Ellen's hometown really this hard to reach?

Or was it somewhere near the beginning of the Sren Mountain Range?

But I didn't know the direction.

I didn't know if Rezaira was closer to the northern, western, southern, or eastern part of the Sren Mountain Range.

So, every time I climbed a peak with great difficulty, I could only look around, feeling like I was searching for a needle in a haystack.

Sleeping made it impossible to know how much time I spent.

I just wandered through the mountain range day and night, cutting down monsters, again and again.

One of those nights.

"Haah… Haah…”

After tearing apart all the approaching monsters, I collapsed onto a rock at the summit, drenched in blood.

Could Rezaira be non-existent?

Could all this effort be in vain?

As I continued to cut down monsters, my accumulated achievement points surpassed 12,000.

However, I couldn't reach the master class with those points alone.

-Whoooooosh!

The gusts of wind at the summit felt like they would tear my face and ears apart.

My clothes were tattered.

I wanted to wash somewhere. Should I do laundry tomorrow?

I thought it would be a waste to bring someone else, so I came alone. Should I have brought someone, anyone else?

An unknown, lofty peak.

This peak seemed to be the highest I've climbed so far.

Sitting on a rock, I gazed at the night sky.

The full moon shone brightly above.

Ellen's mother.

Luna Artorious.

She made the full moon look enormous as if she controlled the world and drew a sword from it.

It was a surreal sight that I couldn't believe even when I saw it with my own eyes.

I still don't know if it was magic, supernatural power, or some other force.

But.

The name Luna.

I couldn't help but repeat the moon-related name in front of the full moon.

Where is Rezaira?

Where is Luna Artorious?

Can I really not find that place?

I am not Ellen.

I don't know the way to become a master class with my own strength.

Though I realized Magic Body Strengthening with my own power, I am not Ellen Artorious, so I don't know the way to become a master class by my own strength.

So someone has to tell me.

Anyone, I'll grab onto them.

I don't want to die like this.

I know that sacrificing my life for the ending is the best option, but I don't want to do it.

I have to find it.

Someone who can lead me.

That someone.

I looked up at the moon quietly.

“…Luna."

Will she come if I call

Will she come if I call to the moon?

If I shout towards it.

If I appeal to the full moon.

"Luna Artorious."

Can I find Rezaira and Luna Artorious?

Towards the moon, vaguely.

"Mother."

With a feeling of injustice and rising heat.

"Mother!"

I cried out.

"Come out! You're watching everything, aren't you? You see it all! Please!"

Desperately.

"Mommmmmm! Mother! Please come out! I know you're watching!"

-Mommmmmmm…

-Maaaaaa…

Damn it.

At my age.

I quietly listened to the embarrassing echo of my own words reverberating through the mountains.

Somehow.

It was a relief that no one heard me, or so I thought.

“…Why."

"!"

Suddenly, a gentle voice reached the back of my head.

It was a familiar voice.

"Why do I have to listen to that?"

As I turned around.

"Mother?"

"So… why do I have to…”

There she was, with a weary expression on her face – a face that was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

Luna Artorious.

Indeed, she had been watching me from somewhere.

CHAPTER 482

Luna responded to my call.

Well, it was more like she responded to a provocation.

The madly blowing wind calmed down the moment she appeared.

Luna Artorius, just as before, gazed at me with a composed expression.

On a night of the full moon.

At last, I found her.

No, she found me.

"What do you want, wandering around this place at this time?"

Casually brushing her long, black hair aside, Luna Artorius asked.

"I want to find mother."

Upon hearing my words, Luna let out a short sigh.

"Why should I listen to your talk about mother? Alright, let's say I will. So, what exactly do you want from me after finding me?"

"I want to become stronger."

"…"

She stared at me in response to my bold and shameless request.

What kind of person is this?

It seemed as though she was thinking that.

Of course.

Ellen's mother would naturally be with Ellen.

Since Ellen made me stronger, I came to find her mother, thinking she would make me even stronger.

I admit, I seem to be a bit of an oddball.

"You don't know what the Sun and Moon Sect is. But if you're not a fool, you should know that we, including myself, are a group that upholds the principle of not interfering in the world's affairs. Didn't you hear me clearly?"

"I heard you."

"Then you understand that I have no reason to help you."

"Then why did you come? Just ignore me."

Upon hearing my words, Luna Artorius stared at me.

Ah.

Look at her lips sticking out.

She's just like Ellen, isn't she?

She took a step forward.

No.

She used some strange space-warping technique.

Is she really going to leave?

"Wait a minute! Wait! Wait! I'm sorry!"

"…"

At my insistence, she stopped her action to step forward and disappear through

space.

"I was just trying to ignore you, as you said I should. Didn't you say that?"

"Mother, as you know, I have a bad habit of speaking like that."

"Ah, I see. It's unfortunate that your upbringing didn't quite make you more polite."

"Due to losing my parents at a young age, I couldn't help but have an unsatisfactory upbringing…"

Ah.

Come to think of it, isn't this something we shouldn't say to each other?

My father and Luna's son were both annihilated.

As I tried to say something and then stopped, Luna quietly stared at me.

"…"

Moreover, she was the first to mention upbringing, so if there was a slip of the tongue, it was on her side.

"Hmm… I apologize. That was rude of me."

She covered her mouth, coughed lightly, and muttered.

"Anyway, I came here to tell you that no matter how much you wander around this place, there's nothing you can gain from me. Stop wasting your time."

Under the full moon's light, Luna gazed at me intently.

"Reinhardt, don't try to save what can't be saved. That's all I can tell you."

She cannot help me.

So, the only thing Luna can say is to do something worthwhile elsewhere at this time.

Really, is that all?

"The Gate incident is almost over."

"…"

"But an unbeatable monster will come out of the last Gate."

"Is that so? You know about strange things, so if you say so, it must be true."

"Do you know… what would happen if you could unleash the true power of Alsbringer?"

"…"

She looked at me and

She looked at me in silence.

That silence was her answer.

"You know it."

"Yes, the power of the gods can be projected onto the owner's flesh."

Luna knew about the true power of the Alsbringer.

"But to dare to summon the power of the gods into one's body comes at the cost of losing one's life. Mortals cannot handle such power."

Luna gazed at me quietly.

"You know it too."

"If things continue like this, I will have to use the Alsbringer to destroy the last Warp Gate."

"What exactly will appear in the end?"

"A dragon."

"…"

"A dragon from another world."

A being that does not exist in this world.

The dragon from another world was the last enemy I had to face, the final boss in the original work.

"If I don't use the Alsbringer, I won't be able to fight that monster."

Luna listened to my words calmly, then tilted her head.

"But even if you become a bit stronger here, the chances of you being able to face the dragon are slim."

"That's true."

Even if I become a Master class, I cannot be sure if I can face the final monster.

To be honest, unless I become powerful enough to summon the war god Als into my body, such a thing would be difficult to happen.

"But I can't just wait for a future that can only be achieved through death."

"You talk as if you have no choice but to do it."

"…"

"Why do you have to?"

Luna asked quietly.

"Why do you think you have to save the world while sacrificing yourself?"

"The world's affairs are the world's affairs."

"The world's affairs are everyone's affairs."

"Because it's everyone's affair, it's no one's affair."

"But why do you live as if the world's affairs are your own?"

"If you don't save the world, why do you live as if everything will end?"

"Even if you turn away from it, would it be your fault?"

"Why do you live in a compulsion that you have to bear all the responsibility?"

"The dragon from another world, whatever it is, as long as it is a living being and a monster, it cannot destroy the whole world."

"I don't know what that monster is, but it can only destroy what is in its sight. Therefore, there will be a safe world from that monster."

"The world is vast."

"So why not avoid the monster and live your own life?"

"Why?"

"Do you take it for granted that you have to die for the world?"

"Why?"

"Just like it's a given, like you have to live."

"In the end, why?"

"Who died with my son… the Demon King… you, his son…"

"At that time…"

"With the same eyes as my son at that time."

"Saying something similar to that time, that he has to die for something."

"Like this, you came to me."

I saw a tear fall from her eyes.

She said it was a rainy day.

Ellen had scolded her brother, and she had been slapped by her father.

That was the last time Ellen saw her brother, she told me.

That's why Ellen came to hate rainy days.

That day must have been a different memory for Ellen's parents.

It must have been the day they heard their son's determination to kill the Demon King for humanity.

Ragan Artorius left.

Ragan Artorius must have believed that killing the Demon King was a righteous act.

In truth, the Demon King of the past, Valier, whom I know of, had the goal of creating a world without humans through the Akasha, a parallel universe.

War erupted because they couldn't understand each other's circumstances.

The Great Demon War of the past was a conflict that broke out due to mutual fear and a lack of willingness to understand each other.

Regardless of who initiated the attack, it's a fact that Ragan Artorious died in the battle against the Demon King.

Hence, setting aside what's right or wrong, to Luna, I am the son of her mortal enemy.

Luna stares at me silently as I say the exact same words her son said in the past when he went off to die.

She sheds a single tear, but no more tears follow.

Without even thinking of wiping away the tear, she keeps gazing at me.

Her son had died.

But now, the son of the Demon King comes saying the same words.

However, the meaning is different this time.

Why must one die for the world?

A sense of responsibility?

A sense of duty?

I'm not sure anymore.

"Honestly, I don't know either. I don't know why I have to go this far. I just don't."

"If that's the case, then…"

"There must be people who can turn a blind eye to this. Surely."

I interrupt her words.

"It's just that I can't. That's all there is to it."

I do have a sense of responsibility.

And a sense of duty.

But when asked why I have to do this, there's only one thing I can say.

I can't turn a blind eye to this broken world.

Though I could ignore it, I can't.

So, at the point when salvation must ultimately be achieved through death, I came here to find other possibilities because I don't want to die.

Ragan Artorious must have said that he would die for humanity.

But I said that if things continue this way, I must die for humanity and the world, so I

want to find even the slightest other possibility.

Luna gazes at me silently.

"I don't know what the dragon of that world is, but you should know that even if you become stronger here, it would still be difficult to face it."

"I suppose."

"Still, you've been crossing mountains for days, just to find that tiny possibility?"

"Yes."

"…"

I don't know precisely what kind of being she is, but it's clear that Luna isn't involved in this situation in any way.

Could she help me?

If she decides to help, what kind of assistance can I receive?

"I don't know if I should really do this."

However, she didn't seem to harbor any ill feelings toward me for being the son of the Demon King.

"But there's no reason to prohibit you from setting foot in Rezaira."

She stares at me silently.

"Reinhardt."

"…Yes."

"Close your eyes."

Following her words, I close my eyes.

I could feel her cold hand gently placed on my shoulder.

"Done. Now, open your eyes."

I had only closed my eyes for a brief moment.

"…?"

I could see a small village spread out at the foot of the mountain.

—---

What exactly is the source of the power Luna uses?

It's neither magic, nor supernatural power, nor divine energy.

As a Master Class, she uses mysterious powers that go beyond physical abilities.

A small land located somewhere in the rugged Sren mountain range.

In that land, there was a tiny village with barely fifty households.

The wooden houses weren't that old, but they weren't incredibly luxurious either.

It was a typical rural village scene that could be found anywhere.

As it was nighttime, there were no people wandering about.

This must be Rezaira.

"Is this place… really safe?"

"It's complicated to explain, and even if you understood, it wouldn't hold any meaning for you. Just know that people can no longer find Rezaira."

In the past, anyone could have found Rezaira. But now, unless a villager brought someone here personally, no one could find Rezaira anymore.

She gazed up quietly at the sky, where a full moon hung.

With a hand stretched out towards the heavens, she cautiously waved it as if manipulating something.

I silently observed her slow, but elegant movement.

"What are you doing?"

At my question, she slightly lowered her head.

"You'll find out eventually."

She seemed like someone who didn't speak more than necessary.

"Follow me; you seem like you could use some rest."

She quietly walked ahead.

Now I could see how she was dressed.

She wore a simple dress, one that any rural woman might wear. It must have been her everyday attire.

Considering she mentioned she was a leader of Rezaira, it was strange to see her looking no different from any other ordinary villager.

She led me to a two-story wooden house.

Upon reflection, it was the house where Ellen had lived since her childhood.

She was born and spent her youth in this house.

The thought stirred a strange emotion within me.

And yet, now that Ellen and I were no longer friends, I found myself in her house without her.

"What are you doing? Aren't you coming in?"

"Ah, yes."

Prompted by Luna, who was waiting with the door open, I entered Ellen's house.

"Honey, we have a guest. Please come out and see."

Luna's voice sent shivers down my spine.

What was this?

Her tone was suddenly very different, smooth and affectionate.

Where had her cold, indifferent tone gone? Her voice was now filled with warmth and love, and I experienced cognitive dissonance.

Would Ellen also adopt this tone if she got married?

Well…

Hmm.

As Luna spoke, a man soon appeared.

“…So, you're Reinhardt."

He seemed to have known that I would come to Rezaira.

He looked somewhat like Ellen, but more accurately, he was a handsome man with a gentle and cheerful appearance.

I remembered seeing a portrait of Ragan Artorius once.

Naturally, he bore a striking resemblance to that man.

He approached me slowly, and Luna stepped aside.

It didn't seem like Luna harbored any hatred towards me, the son of the Demon King.

However, Ellen's father might have different thoughts.

But, he extended his hand to me with a faint smile.

"I am Ronan Artorius."

Unlike Ellen's mother, his handshake was large, firm, and strong. He looked at me and chuckled.

CHAPTER 483

"You smell worse than an animal rolling around in a barn. Go wash yourself."

Following Luna's suggestion, I entered the bathroom.

I couldn't disagree. I hadn't been able to wash for a long time and had been drenched in monster blood multiple times.

In the bathroom, there was a large tub filled with water, and I could hear the sound of wood burning outside.

It was a strange feeling, seeing people who wielded such extraordinary powers deliberately living in such a primitive manner.

Ellen had no knowledge of her own village.

Thus, the matter of the Sun and Moon clan was probably a concern only for the adults in this village.

Considering that, maintaining such a lifestyle didn't seem too strange.

Would one learn the village's secrets only after becoming an adult and reaching a certain age?

For now, I simply submerged myself in the hot water.

"Is the water alright?"

I couldn't help but be startled by the deep voice coming from beyond the wall.

It was Ellen's father.

Ronan's voice.

"Ah… Yes. Thank you."

What a strange and bizarre feeling, like a boyfriend visiting his girlfriend's house without her being there.

What is this feeling of being taken care of so well that I don't know what to do with myself?

Moreover, Ellen and I aren't in that kind of relationship at all.

But…

Father, you see…

I actually have the Flames of Tuesday, so I could have warmed the water myself… In fact, I could have done it alone…

Should I mention this… Would I get scolded?

For now, I'll just keep quiet.

I rubbed the dried blood off my face and hair, washing it away.

It had been days since I had properly rested.

"Phew…"

The realization that I had finally arrived at a safe place allowed my tightly wound nerves to relax.

I had wandered through the mountains without proper rest for a long time.

Eventually, Ellen's mother found me, and I was able to reach Rezaira.

It had been a long, tedious, and dangerous journey.

At last, I had arrived at a safe place.

In the hot water, I couldn't help but feel a profound sense of relief.

Whatever happens, I should lie down on a proper bed and get some rest.

I managed to achieve my primary goal; I'll think about what's next later.

Knock knock

"Reinhardt."

"Ah, yes!"

Startled by the knock on the bathroom door, I reflexively replied.

Just now, it was Ronan; now, it was Luna.

"I left some clothes outside the door. Change into them."

"Ah… Yes, thank you."

It's a strange feeling.

At first, I was reluctantly calling her 'Mother,' but now that it's come to this…

This situation…

It's incredibly awkward…

As if Luna knew my situation, Ronan seemed to know that I had been lost.

After washing up, I changed into the clothes Ellen's mother had prepared and went out to the living room.

I could hear Luna doing something in the kitchen.

Was she preparing food for me?

To me, Luna Artorius was even stronger than Saviolin Turner.

Yet, in such an ordinary household, she was cooking for a late-night guest – it felt surreal.

Ellen's father sat across from me, silently watching.

"…"

To be precise, it seemed as though he was looking at the clothes I was wearing.

Speaking of which…

Ellen's father was quite large.

Although I wasn't short, he was significantly bigger than me in both size and build.

Naturally, the clothes I was wearing were for men, and they were not something Ronan would wear.

Nor would they belong to Ellen.

Thus, I could tell whose clothes they were without asking.

I was now wearing the clothes that Ragan Artorius had worn.

Hence, Ronan Artorius in front of me couldn't help but look at me and the clothes I was wearing with a hard-to-describe expression.

What a bizarre situation this was.

To put it bluntly, I had come to the home of the parents of the warrior who killed my father, and I was wearing the clothes that the deceased warrior had worn in his lifetime, being treated to a meal.

Both I, who came to seek them out.

And the couple who took me in.

We were all entities that had strayed far from normalcy.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes?"

"Have you seen Ellen since the Gate incident?"

At that question, I felt as if I was suffocating.

I had seen her.

We had even run into each other.

We hadn't had a proper conversation, but we exchanged some words.

Perhaps reading something from my expression, Ronan nodded his head.

"It seems it wasn't a pleasant reunion."

“…Yes."

Ronan and Luna seemed to be aware of the relationship and situation between Ellen and me.

And the things we would face in the future.

Ellen once told me.

Her mother often made beef stew at home.

Leaving aside whether the food was good or not, there was a limit to what could be cooked in a rural village like this. There wouldn't be enough ingredients.

I wondered where the beef came from, but Ellen's mother definitely made beef stew.

What was strange was that the food Ellen's mother made tasted new to me.

"…”

When I hesitated after taking a bite of the stew, Luna stared at me intently.

A person who was evidently related to Ellen, or rather, Ellen was related to Luna, anyway.

Was the subtle sulky trait also present on this side?

"It's delicious… I mean, it really is."

Despite my words, Luna still looked puzzled.

"It might not suit your taste. You must have always eaten food made with the finest ingredients and spices."

Technically, that wasn't wrong.

I had lived in the Temple Royal Class, the finest environment in the Empire, and then ruled as king in Edina.

The quality of food had never been an issue.

But, it wasn't tasteless, was it?

"No, it's just that it's interesting. I mean, it's not that it's interesting, it's just a new taste… I'm not saying it's tasteless. Anyway, it's delicious. Yes."

It wasn't tasteless, just a bit strange since it was my first time tasting such a flavor.

In this environment, it's likely that they used herbs and edible wild plants instead of commonly used spices.

So it had a unique taste, but it wasn't tasteless.

However, Luna seemed to have already been offended by my hesitation.

She narrowed her eyes and looked out the window.

"Well, it's inevitable that your taste is picky because of your upbringing. I'm sorry, this is all I can prepare."

This person.

Feeling guilty over such a strange thing!

"Ah, come on, honey. What would a city boy know?"

"That's true, I suppose."

Ronan gently patted the sulky Luna's shoulder.

Why.

Why on earth.

Do I have to see this side of my friend's parents?

Ah, I came here on my own accord, didn't I?

After finally finishing the meal through twists and turns, I went up to the second floor.

There were three rooms on the second floor.

One was a storeroom, and the purpose of the other two was immediately apparent.

One must be Ragan Artorius's room, and the other would be Ellen's.

"This is Ellen's room. Rest here."

“…Yes."

Luna handed over the bedding, which was laid on Ellen's wooden bed.

"…”

Although it was unknown how Ragan's room was being preserved, there was nothing special about the room Ellen had used.

Of course, it had likely been empty since Ellen went to the temple and after the Gate incident.

Naturally, there were no traces or lingering scents of Ellen.

However, this was the room Ellen had occupied for a long time.

She would have spent her childhood here and lived here until she went to the temple.

There were no extravagant ornaments or accessories in the room. Ellen might have put them away, but it was more likely that her character wouldn't have had them in the first place.

A desk, a wardrobe, a bed.

And on the wall hung several old, worn wooden swords.

The simplicity suited Ellen's personality. The room probably hadn't changed much since she lived here.

Her dorm room had also been quite bare, except for a few essentials.

And that was the same for me.

Upon reflection, Ellen and I shared many similarities.

Neither of us had any interest in decorating our rooms.

We spent our days training as if something terrible would happen if we didn't.

Neither of us had any personal hobbies, aside from that.

"…”

For some reason, the atmosphere felt strange.

I couldn't sense any trace of Ellen in her room.

Naturally, I began to think about what Ellen was like.

I wondered how she would react if she knew I had suddenly come to visit Rezaira.

Of course, I knew that wasn't a possibility, but I couldn't help but be curious.

I wanted to restore everything I had lost.

Even though it seemed infinitely impossible.

So, for now, I had to survive.

In the final battle, and in the possible future where I might have to fight against Ellen, I needed to stay alive.

I was engaged in the bizarre act of seeking out the parents of the person I might someday have to fight.

I didn't know what I could gain from being here.

But I had managed to arrive in Rezaira.

The next day, morning.

When I opened the window, the morning sunlight and the scenery of Rezaira came into view all at once.

No, it wasn't morning; it was almost noon.

It was a cozy landscape.

So peaceful that it seemed like nothing would happen for hundreds of years.

I could see the villagers going about their day, and children playing here and there.

There weren't many houses, but the residents were living peacefully.

"You slept the entire day."

"Huh?"

"You must have been tired, so it makes sense."

Luna's words made me realize just how exhausted I had been.

"I let the villagers know that we have a guest. So, they shouldn't be surprised to see

you."

"Ah… Thank you."

"Do you want to take a walk around the village? Get familiar with the faces of the people."

Somehow.

Her words seemed to imply that I would be staying here for quite a while.

Rezaira was bound to be a closed-off village due to its environment.

Naturally, such a village would be wary of strangers.

However, the people of Rezaira showed no such apprehension.

"You're Ellen's friend? Your name is Rein…"

"It's Reinhardt."

"Yes, Reinhardt. Make yourself at home."

Ellen's friend.

Luna Artorius seemed to have told the villagers that the guest who came under that pretext would stay in Rezaira for a while.

Of course, I was the only stranger in the village, so passersby, regardless of their age or gender, approached me and spoke a word.

"Ellen's friend? Hehe… I'm worried about how Ellen is doing."

"Is Ellen doing well?"

"Are you Ellen's boyfriend?"

"Goodness, you're quite the handsome one."

"Ah… Ellen must have a hard time outside…”

"Why did you come alone without Ellen?"

Without any particular malicious intent, everyone was friendly.

Through the reactions of the children and adults, I could grasp the truth about Rezaira.

The children didn't know that the outside world had turned into chaos.

On the other hand, the adults, who knew the situation to some extent, slightly darkened their expressions as soon as Ellen's story was mentioned.

It was only natural to keep quiet, as there was no benefit in the children realizing that the outside world had turned into a mess and countless people were dying.

My peers.

That is, those who seemed to be friends of Ellen also came.

"Hello? Ellen's friend? My name is Lena."

"Uh… hi."

"You should tell me your name, too."

"Reinhardt."

"Yes, Reinhardt. Nice to meet you."

She was a lively-looking woman with short brown hair. Intrigued by the appearance of a stranger in this countryside village, she stared at my face for a while.

"My name is Arta."

On the contrary, a somewhat curt man approached me and offered his hand.

"I've heard the situation outside is terrible."

"Well… it is."

They were probably around twenty years old, like Ellen's friends. Although they didn't know exactly how the world was turning, they knew to some extent.

As I greeted each person and wandered around Rezaira, there was only one thought on my mind.

I don't have time for this.

I didn't come to Rezaira for fun.

I didn't come to greet each and every member of the village, but to receive guidance from Ellen's mother or father.

I shouldn't be wasting my time like this.

For now, I'm meeting people and looking around the village as Luna Artorius instructed.

However, people are dying even at this moment.

I entrusted Edina's affairs to Charlotte, but I don't know if things are really going well.

I don't have time to waste like this.

In Rezaira's peace, I was anxious, thinking about the outside world without peace.

From a distance, a group of people descended from the foothills of the mountain range.

Someone carried something on their shoulder, and at the very front, I saw the figure of Ronan Artorius descending with a large wild boar slung over his shoulder.

Had they gone hunting as a group?

Somehow.

In this place, unrelated to the affairs of the world.

Amidst the ordinary daily lives of these people.

I felt a certain cruelty.

CHAPTER 484

On the night that I exchanged greetings with the people of Rezaira, there was a feast.

It was a feast to welcome me, a friend and guest of Ellen.

Game was hunted, prepared, and roasted whole, and the village people gathered to eat and drink.

The people of Rezaira lived by providing for themselves, and it seemed there were no problems with their self-sufficiency.

They welcomed me simply because I was Ellen's friend.

The adults knew that the world was currently in great turmoil, but they did not mention it.

And most seemed to know nothing about the Sun and Moon clan.

Although everyone worried about Ellen, they seemed to believe that nothing bad would happen to her.

Would the people of Rezaira be born here and live here until they die?

Did outsiders ever drift into the village?

"What's really going on outside? We're so deep in the mountains that nothing happens here, and the adults don't say anything. They just tell us not to go too far from the village."

Lena.

The one who was introduced as Ellen's childhood friend asked me this.

Arta, sitting on the other side, seemed to be focusing on me as well.

These guys didn't know the details either.

It seemed they didn't realize that it was very strange for Rezaira to have no problems at the moment.

"It's dangerous, very dangerous."

"Tsk, you're not going to tell me properly either?"

There was no reason to tell those who didn't know the specifics that the outside world had turned into hell.

I smiled quietly, watching the chattering village adults and Ellen's parents.

There's no need to die for someone else. Just because one has power and ability, it doesn't mean they must do such things.

However, I couldn't feel comfortable seeing these people living hidden from the world like this.

I didn't know exactly what kind of power they possessed.

But if their powers were combined, wouldn't the situation be resolved more quickly?

In the end, I couldn't erase such regrets and doubts.

-…

As if she could read my thoughts, Ellen's mother, Luna Artoleus, glanced at me from afar.

She soon turned her gaze elsewhere, but I could feel that she had looked at me precisely just now.

"Follow me, Reinhardt."

After the feast ended, she called me aside after tidying up.

Without a word, she led the way over the slopes of Rezaira.

Soon, we arrived at a clearing with a small storage shed.

Luna didn't bother to explain what this place was.

I could tell without an explanation.

It must have been the place where Ragan and Ellen practiced swordsmanship.

I didn't know how the two heroes practiced swordsmanship here. Perhaps Ragan taught Ellen the sword. I didn't know if Ragan learned the sword from Luna or from Ronan.

However, I could tell that I was now at a historic site of some kind.

What could she teach me?

What could I learn from Luna?

"You can't possess the power I use."

It wasn't that she couldn't teach me, but that I couldn't possess it.

At that definitive statement, it felt as if the air was suffocating.

"I may not be able to teach you anything properly."

I didn't know what her constraints were or what her situation was. It just seemed that even trying to teach me something was a great adventure for her.

As if I could not turn away from the world.

Perhaps she couldn't turn away from me either, and that was the story.

"Just promise me one thing."

"What… are you asking?"

"Trust me."

"…"

"Can you do that?"

Trust me.

I didn't know what that meant.

Why would she say this before teaching me something?

Perhaps, it's a hint that situations where I can't trust her will continue to arise.

But why, as if foreseeing a situation where I can't trust her, would she say such a thing?

Still, she had accepted me, who had abruptly sought her out.

Moreover, she intended to teach me something.

"Of course, I should."

"…"

She stared at me quietly.

I had to trust her.

Only then could I take something away and be prepared for what comes later.

I had to trust her.

After all, there's nothing to gain from doubting Luna at this point.

What would she think of my words of trust?

She didn't express any particular opinion.

She simply nodded her head quietly.

"Try Magic Body Strengthening."

"Yes."

-Zrrrring!

Magic Body Strengthening itself had become as easy as breathing.

The explosive release of magic flowing through my body, and the enhancement.

Could she lead me to the next level?

About three seconds had passed since I used the Magic Body Strengthening.

"That's enough, stop."

At her command, I stopped releasing the strengthening magic.

Could she discern my problems just by watching? Luna turned her body.

"Your mana flow is overly emotional."

She left me with just that remark and added,

"Let's go back."

Trust me.

It seemed I now understood what that meant.

How much time was left?

I thought there was plenty of time before the final battle.

However, since the situation differed from the original work, unexpected events could happen at any time.

In Edina, I could get a rough idea of the continent and empire's conditions through the information that Antirianus gathered.

But in the isolated world of Rezaira, I couldn't hear news from the outside.

Though I arrived in Rezaira to find a breakthrough, I learned nothing.

All I heard was that my mana flow was overly emotional.

Several days passed.

Luna prepared meals for me and busied herself with village tasks alongside Ronan.

It was evident at a glance that their self-sufficient lives were hectic.

I couldn't help but grow anxious watching this scene.

I didn't have time for this.

I didn't have time to waste.

Even now, countless people were dying, I didn't know what was happening in Edina, and I was unaware of the empire and continent's current state.

I should be swinging my sword without pause, but instead, I was forced to watch the rural villagers go about their lives.

Mother, don't you worry about Ellen?

I felt the urge to scream this dozens of times a day.

But she didn't even tell me to try Magic Body Strengthening again since that night.

Being isolated from the world in Rezaira, I couldn't even hear about the world's events.

I felt like I was going mad from frustration, and although Luna and Ronan took good care of me, they didn't provide what I truly wanted.

Feeling like I was going insane, I spent the entire day swinging my sword in the empty field.

She might have expected me to find a breakthrough on my own.

Exhausting my vast magical power, I drew it out until I was on the verge of collapse.

When I reached that state, I leaned against a tree, resting blankly.

Once recovered, I focused my mind to find the next level of Magic Body Strengthening.

There was no progress.

A week since arriving in Rezaira.

Although I became somewhat acquainted with the people of Rezaira, Luna and Ronan still did not teach me anything.

In the end, I had no choice but to make a decision.

Breakfast time.

"Excuse me… Can I return for a while and come back?"

"Return? Where do you mean?"

At Luna's words, I sighed.

"I have people and matters I need to look after. I think I need to assess the situation and then return."

She looked at me quietly upon hearing my words.

"You may return. However, if you do, I won't allow you back into Rezaira."

"…"

Why?

Is it such a big problem to leave for a while and come back?

Those words were on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't say them.

Luna told me to trust her.

But a week.

I felt like I was losing my mind in a situation where she didn't pay any attention.

It would be nice if she at least gave me a task, even if it was something I couldn't handle.

But instead, I was just left neglected, doing nothing.

No matter how much I struggled alone, I couldn't grasp a clue. And that was something I could do anywhere, not just in Rezaira.

Not knowing what was happening in Edina without me, how events were unfolding and rolling, I felt like I was going crazy.

I initially intended to be away for a while, but upon leaving, I realized that it was not Edina that needed me but that I desperately needed information about the world.

Unable to know how the world was turning, I felt like I was going mad with anxiety.

That's why, for just a moment.

It would only take a few hours to travel back and forth via teleport.

If I leave, she won't let me back in here ever again.

I couldn't understand what Luna was thinking.

"What will you do?"

As if to say it's your choice, Luna looked at me quietly.

Time was passing.

Irreversible events must be happening.

Can I really gain something from Rezaira?

“…I will stay."

Luna just nodded her head silently, as if to say, do as you wish.

Two weeks since arriving in Rezaira.

It had been well over a month since I left Edina.

As the end of the gate incident approached, the destruction of the gates slowed down, and we had to be careful when approaching each gate to prepare for the big battle.

I had that thought hundreds of times a day, like a fit.

Isolation. And anxiety.

I was going crazy because of the unknown events happening in my absence.

Was Charlotte taking care of Edina's affairs well?

Would there be any trouble with Liana, Olivia, and Harriet caught in the middle?

Was Ellen okay? Was she involved in any overly dangerous operations?

Not knowing what was happening in the world, my stress caused me to feel nauseous from time to time.

At least yesterday, Luna told me to do Magic Body Strengthening once again.

This time, she didn't say a word. As soon as she saw me using my Magic Body Strengthening, she said it was done, then abruptly turned around and left.

If it's hopeless, it's hopeless.

If it's rough, it's rough.

If it's severely lacking, it's lacking.

If there's a problem, at least tell me what the problem is.

I wanted to shout that out, but I couldn't say a word.

Something is missing.

Wondering if I had to realize it on my own, I relentlessly practiced Magic Body Strengthening in the vacant lot.

"Ha… hah…"

Even the most powerful magic has its limits.

Having exhausted all my magic, I leaned against a tree stump, my entire body drenched in sweat.

Through the process of depleting and recovering my magical power, the amount of magic was indeed increasing.

But I have to move on to the next stage.

This no longer has any meaning.

Talent.

The talents are ready.

No one but Ellen has the optimal conditions to become a master class.

I don't know what the problem is or what's missing.

It seems like I only need to take one step.

But I don't know how to take that step.

"Want some water?"

"…Huh?"

Turning my head at the sudden voice, a short-haired girl was holding a water bottle out to me.

“…Thanks."

Without any particular reason to refuse, I opened the canteen Lena handed to me and drank the water.

The cold water felt like it was cooling my brain in one gulp. It might be more than just the water being cold; my head had become excessively hot.

I had become somewhat acquainted with the villagers while staying here for two weeks.

However, I spent almost all day in this vacant field, so I rarely encountered anyone.

This was only the third time I had a conversation with Lena, Ellen's childhood friend.

Lena tilted her head as she looked at me.

"You're always here, aren't you?"

“…Yeah."

"Actually, I've been watching you from a distance for a while, and you seem really skilled."

“…Really?"

I could suppress master class opponents with just my Magic Body Strengthening output. My physical ability is exceptional, and that fact remains unchanged.

It's just that it doesn't suit my nature.

I stared at Lena.

This is no ordinary village called Rezaira.

Could Lena also know how to use weapons, like a sword?

"Do you know how to use weapons, too?"

"Me?"

Lena pointed at herself with her finger, then shook her head vigorously.

"Not really? I did learn a bit with Ellen and Arta from big brother Ragan, but I had no talent for it."

This villager casually mentions the names of two human heroes.

Rezaira is indeed a very strange village.

"Come to think of it, you seem to handle a sword better than Ragan or Ellen."

"No way…"

"Is that so? I saw Ragan and Ellen wield swords a long time ago, so maybe that's why. I wonder if Ellen is amazing now?"

Lena seemed to have no talent for handling weapons at all.

It was my prejudice against Rezaira, but aside from a few people, the residents of Rezaira might be more ordinary than I thought.

Anyway, Lena's evaluation was wrong.

I don't know what Ragan Artorius's achievements were when he faced the Demon King, but Ellen is stronger than me just considering her swordsmanship, and I'm no match for her when she uses everything she has.

Lena took the canteen I was holding and drank the water, gulping it down. After drinking, Lena looked at me and crossed her arms.

"I don't really know why you came here."

"…Yeah."

"You know, when I watch you, I feel really uneasy."

"…Uneasy?"

At those words, I felt something hit me in the heart.

"I don't know what's happening outside, or why you, Ellen's friend, came here without her… but when I look at you, I feel anxious too. I don't know what you're doing or why you're here."

Anxiety.

Impatience.

Was it so evident?

"What's the rush?"

It's entirely possible for Lena, who knows nothing of my circumstances, to say such things. She knows I have some unknown situation, but she doesn't know the specifics, nor what's happening outside.

What's the rush?

I'm in a situation where I can't afford to be leisurely.

However, I had no intention of explaining my situation to Lena.

"If you rush too much, you'll be unable to do even the things you can."

“…What?"

Lena looks at me as she says something unexpected.

"Don't push yourself too hard. I'll be going now."

As if it were just an offhand remark, Lena left those words behind and got up from her spot, disappearing into the distance.

I silently watched Lena's retreating figure.

What should I say?

It seemed that Lena wasn't the only strange thing in Rezaira.

"…”

I sat quietly in the vacant field, lost in thought.

Magic Body Strengthening.

The master class that surpasses that.

And the anxiety and impatience that dominate my entire body.

Quietly, I draw out the magical power from my whole body and activate it.

The turbulent flow of mana that fiercely enveloped my body was clearly visible even to my own eyes.

It's rough.

"…”

Luna had said something similar as well.

'Your mana flow is excessively emotional.'

Perhaps there's something fundamentally wrong with my Magic Body Strengthening.

CHAPTER 485

Luna had warned me that she might not be able to teach me properly.

True to her words, she never gave me any guidance after that.

An offhand remark by Lena, Ellen's childhood friend, struck a chord with me.

She said that if I rushed too much, I wouldn't be able to do the things I was capable of.

Luna's comment about me being overly emotional did align with Lena's remark to some extent.

But it was difficult to stay composed in my current situation.

There were too many concerns crowding my mind.

No matter how much I tried to focus on the future, the fact that all these problems were out of my hands only increased my anxiety.

Luna still didn't teach me anything, and I continued to practice Magic Body Strengthening in an empty lot, surrounded by anxiety and restlessness.

"I brought you a packed lunch. Eat something first."

"Uh… Thank you."

Lena occasionally brought me water or a packed lunch.

Her behavior seemed slightly awkward, and I could tell that she was aware of my reaction.

"Luna told me to give this to you. Do you think I would have made it myself?"

"Ah, I see."

No.

What I need is guidance, not a packed lunch.

Luna must have had her reasons, and I just didn't understand them.

Luna Artorius was providing me with the help I truly needed, but she was taking care of me discreetly.

At the crude wooden table in the empty lot, I ate a sandwich filled with stiff bread, ham, and vegetables.

Speaking of Luna, though.

My first impression of Luna Artorius was of a transcendent, supreme being.

But was she no more than the neighborhood lady in Rezaira?

Neighborhood lady (world's strongest, brings packed lunches).

"By the way, don't you think Ellen and Luna look a lot alike?"

"I suppose they do."

Their resemblance was striking. Of course, upon closer inspection, Ellen had a slightly more youthful look.

But now Ellen was twenty years old and an adult. Even so, she didn't look exactly like Luna.

"Ronan also looks a lot like Ragan, or rather, Ragan looks a lot like Ronan. That sounds a bit strange."

Lena laughed as if she found her own words amusing.

Lena said this and then quietly gazed at the village.

"You can feel it too, right?"

"Feel what?"

"Our village, it's a bit strange."

I couldn't help but be taken aback by Lena's words, as I hadn't expected her to say something like this.

Did Lena, who knew even less about Rezaira than I did, really think the village was strange?

"It's weird. When you look at Luna, it's like she doesn't age at all."

"Ah…”

Her youthful face was remarkably unblemished, and there were no traces of time on it.

On the other hand, while Ronan Artorius didn't show many signs of aging, you could still feel it to some extent.

The fact that Lena, a fellow villager, also found this strange was quite intriguing to me.

"Ever since I was a little girl, Luna hasn't changed at all."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah."

Lena moved her face closer to mine and whispered softly.

"And you know, there are some elderly people in the village who call Luna 'Lady Luna.'"

"Really?"

"Yeah. They don't do it when children are around, but when they think we're not there, they address her as if she's a very important person."

Lord of the Moon and Sun

Luna Artorius was well aware that she was a special existence even in the village of

Rezaira.

It seemed only natural that the elders would show her respect.

"I thought they'd tell me more when I got older, but either I'm not old enough yet, or they just don't plan on telling us at all. They haven't said a word!"

Lena pouted, seemingly hurt and resentful.

-Hmph

"Lena, don't talk nonsense to a stranger."

Along with the low, muffled voice from the direction of Rezaira, someone appeared.

"Huh? Arta. What brings you here?"

One of Ellen's childhood friends, a young man named Arta.

A blunt and sharp-featured man.

Quite the opposite of the gentle and caring Lena.

Arta had shown no particular interest in me until now.

"Hey, outsider."

"What?"

I couldn't help but respond tersely to his brusque tone.

"It's a bit pathetic to see you alone like that. Let's practice together."

He rummaged through the storage area in the empty lot and brought out two wooden swords.

-Whoosh!

I easily caught the wooden sword Arta threw at me.

"Do you know how to use a weapon?"

At my question, Arta narrowed his brow slightly.

"No, I'm not very good at it."

As he said this, he pointed his wooden sword at me.

"Compared to Ragan, at least."

Though he claimed to be unskilled, the implication was clear – he was quite proficient.

Lena showed no intention of stopping us, watching as we faced off.

Arta stared at me intently, wooden sword poised.

I didn't feel any exceptional aura from him.

I wasn't sure to what extent the residents of Rezaira were special, but Lena was undoubtedly ordinary, and Arta didn't seem extraordinary either.

The ability of Magic Body Strengthening was not something anyone could awaken to.

It was a power that only a rare few could attain. Even in the Temple, where talents from all over the continent were gathered, only a minority eventually succeeded in Magic Body Strengthening.

Ellen and I, who awakened to Magic Body Strengthening at seventeen, were very rare cases.

Ellen, who became a master-class at eighteen, could be considered almost unique.

And I, who could face a master-class with only Magic Body Strengthening, could also be considered almost unique.

Thus, no matter how special the village of Rezaira was, Arta couldn't be my match.

If Arta were around twenty years old, not yet having awakened to Magic Body Strengthening wouldn't be a special case; it was actually quite common.

And so,

Even if my opponent were weak and inexperienced, I didn't want to crush him with the power of Magic Body Strengthening.

Skill against skill.

After all, I no longer felt inferior to Ellen.

Arta took a step forward.

-Thud!

In an instant, I lost sight of his movement.

-Crack!

I instinctively defended my side, and the wooden sword made a crisp sound as it struck.

"What the-?"

As Arta retreated, he swung his wooden sword at me from the front.

"Aren't you underestimating me?"

-Whoosh!

A threatening sound of slicing air whizzed past my right cheek, coming from the wooden sword.

I could feel the extraordinary speed and destructive power against my skin.

"You."

This guy.

"What is it?"

How could he move like this without Magic Body Strengthening?

-Whoosh!

I aimed a knee strike at his solar plexus, which had come too close for comfort, but he twisted his body, dodged to the side, and easily moved away.

"Who knows?"

Arta tilted his head.

"What do you think?"

He swung his wooden sword a few times in the air before aiming it at me again.

Lena was ordinary, but this guy was anything but.

I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but he wasn't someone to underestimate.

Even without using Magic Body Strengthening, my abilities surpassed the A-rank average.

And here was someone, without using Magic Body Strengthening, moving at a similar pace as me.

Vroom!

Seeing me enveloped in blue flames, Arta grinned.

I threw away the wooden sword in my right hand.

I didn't need a weapon that couldn't withstand my power.

"Oh."

Arta laughed.

"Actually, I prefer it that way too."

He also tossed away his wooden sword.

I wasn't an expert in hand-to-hand combat, but I was no amateur either.

After all, I had learned more than just swordsmanship from Ellen.

Bam!

But something was off.

Vroom!

This was definitely strange.

As our fists collided, a threatening shockwave swept through the vacant lot.

Arta managed to block my powerful punch by crossing his arms and was thrown backward.

Even with my body reinforced by Magic Body Strengthening, it was stronger than steel.

Arta had somehow blocked it with crossed arms, shook off the impact, and immediately leaped back into action.

Thump!

I blocked his high kick with my left forearm, and a dull shock coursed through me.

Arta was unleashing destructive power that should have been impossible with his bare hands.

This didn't make any sense.

No matter how strong one's body is, such physical strength that reinforces the body's durability shouldn't be possible. That could only be achieved through Magic Body Strengthening.

Thud!

Screech!

Thwack!

Screech!

His spinning kick missed me, but it shattered a tree behind me, leaving me dumbfounded.

Could this really be happening?

This should only be possible for someone like me, who has boosted their physical abilities through nearly cheating methods. And yet, Arta was doing it with his bare hands.

He wasn't even clad in blue magic.

How was this even possible?

How could someone with a bare-handed output stronger than mine, who used illicit methods not found in this world, even exist?

Did he possess a legitimate technique greater than my own?

As if uninterested in my internal struggle, Arta continued his relentless assault.

Bam! Crash! Screech!

With each collision between our bare hands and magically strengthened bodies, dust billowed and the dry ground cracked underfoot.

His skills were impressive, and so was his strength.

But overall, he could never catch up to me.

As he lunged toward me, I caught the movement of his left leg, preparing for another spinning kick.

I quickly lowered my stance and kicked his left leg out from under him.

"!"

Bam!

As he lost balance and fell, I moved to land the decisive blow.

Pat!

The moment before I struck, Arta swiftly pushed off the ground with one hand, flipping backward and creating distance between us.

"You're not so easy to deal with. I admit defeat."

With a nod, Arta seemingly acknowledged his loss, dusting off his hands.

Although the outcome wasn't entirely clear, he seemed to accept that continuing would only confirm his defeat.

But I couldn't understand.

"What are you?"

"Huh?"

I couldn't comprehend it at all.

"How can you move like that without using Magic Body Strengthening? How can you withstand it?"

“…Ah. I was wondering what you were talking about."

Arta shrugged his shoulders.

"Didn't you keep using that?"

“…What?"

Only then did I notice the blue flow of magic in his body, which had shown no signs of movement before.

It seemed that I couldn't see it unless he did something like this, as if to show it off on purpose.

"Do you have to see it with your own eyes to understand?"

An intricate Magic Body Strengthening that didn't even emit the flow of mana outside.

It felt as if all the common sense I knew so far had been completely denied.

Did they teach Magic Body Strengthening in Rezaira?

Are Lena and Arta somewhat different?

Even Ellen wasn't at this level.

Was Arta related to the secrets of Rezaira?

"Well, in the end, you're stronger than me, but if I were to say one thing, um… your Magic Body Strengthening is… how should I put it…"

Arta shook his head as he looked at me.

"It's incredibly inefficient."

Luna's words.

Following Lena's words and now Arta's.

I could finally understand what my problem had been.

Two years after the Gate Incident.

As I could increase my status points with achievement scores, my physical abilities improved dramatically.

Rather than a dramatic improvement, it was more fitting to call it abnormal.

I had achieved what ordinary people couldn't achieve through hard work, using a shortcut.

Therefore, my magic rank rose to SS rank due to this abnormal growth.

As a result, I boasted of being able to face a master-class opponent with just Magic Body Strengthening.

However, only my output had increased, my skills had not improved at all.

No, it wasn't just a lack of improvement.

They had actually regressed.

"Your Magic Body Strengthening is like a projection of your true nature. The form of your Magic Body Strengthening is very violent and rough."

All I could do was nod dumbly at Arta's words.

"I don't know what's wrong with your body, but if you do Magic Body Strengthening like that, your body should break down. It's strange that it doesn't."

My body could withstand my rough method only because of my powerful basic physical abilities.

I forcibly released an enormous amount of magic, strengthening my body.

It was strange that I could endure it, but my Magic Body Strengthening was essentially destroying myself.

It wasn't always like this, but it had become so at some point.

Therefore, although I could beat Arta in terms of output, I couldn't even follow the tips of his toes in terms of skill.

A sophisticated Magic Body Strengthening that didn't even show a hint of enhancement.

If Arta could convert about 90% of his magic power into his strength, I couldn't even convert half of my magic power into strength.

The efficiency was too low, but I didn't lose because the absolute output was high.

I won in practice duels, but I felt a sense of defeat.

What's important in Magic Body Strengthening is not only output, but also efficiency, which is what I can improve now that I can't increase my output further.

The fact that my Magic Body Strengthening took the form of a massive blue flame and burned intensely meant that my magic was incompletely combusting.

This method that only suppressed with force.

I had to fix this method.

“…Thank you."

Arta taught me something that Luna hadn't.

No, did she know that it would turn out like this?

"What's there to be thankful for?"

Arta shrugged his shoulders and said nothing more.

CHAPTER 486

The thought that the place called Rezaira might not be home to ordinary people, except for Luna, was overturned after seeing Arta.

It was unlikely that a village with someone around my age who had mastered Magic Body Strengthening to such an extent could be considered ordinary.

That night.

"Today, I heard from Arta what my problem was."

At the dinner table with Ellen's parents, I brought up the subject.

"What did you hear?"

In response to Ellen's father, Ronan's question, I dipped my bread in the stew and took a bite.

"He said that my Magic Body Strengthening is extremely inefficient."

"I see."

Ronan nodded quietly, while Luna simply continued her dinner.

Too emotional.

Why couldn't she say it more directly like Arta? I would have preferred an accurate statement rather than a roundabout one.

Do they both expect me to realize everything on my own?

That approach takes too much time.

Despite knowing that impatience was consuming me, I couldn't let it go.

"Reinhardt."

Ronan quietly called my name.

"Yes."

He put his bread on the plate and held up his index finger.

"The magical power within the body is the flame of the heart."

“…Yes."

I understood the analogy to some extent.

From Ronan's index finger, blue mana began to rise like smoke.

I had suspected that just as Luna was no ordinary person, neither was Ronan.

"Do you think the emphasis of the phrase 'flame of the heart' lies on the heart or the flame?"

"The heart… I suppose."

"Yes, you're right."

The blue mana emanating from the tip of Ronan's index finger soon began to flicker like a tiny candle flame.

"If your heart is calm, the flame of your heart will be calm as well."

The flame originating from his finger suddenly grew larger and started to undulate.

"If your heart is in turmoil, the flame of your heart will be like this."

The burning magical flame, seemingly capable of tearing its surroundings apart, was indeed making the air in the living room ripple.

"And if your heart is dark…”

Instantly.

The blue mana transformed as if its very nature had changed, flickering roughly with

a dark, ominous hue.

"The flame of your heart may respond to your dark side and change like this."

-Krrrrr

"However…"

The black flame at the tip of Ronan's finger disappeared, and the gentle blue mana returned.

"If your heart is not in turmoil."

"And not dark."

"Unswayed by any emotions that cloud your heart."

"Beyond tranquility."

"Surpassing serenity."

"If you advance to the stage called 'clear mirror, still water' or 'immovable mind'…"

"Once you have gained an unwavering, strong heart, a peace and serenity devoid of doubt, and absolute certainty…"

"What will become of the flame of your heart?"

No longer smoke or a flame, something else emerged from his index finger.

"If the flame of your heart no longer wavers, what will it become?"

The mana emanating from his fingertip neither wavered nor flickered.

A straight line of mana extended.

The line extending from the tip of his index finger grew longer and eventually took on a distinct shape.

A shaped flame.

A flame that no longer wavered.

It soon took on a form akin to a solid object.

An intangible sword.

A sword forged by the heart.

Summoning the Aura Sword, Ronan Artorius sliced a loaf of bread with the blade that extended from his fingertips.

"The moment when the flame of the heart can no longer be a flame."

"…"

"Then, you will be able to attain what you desire."

-Thud!

After finishing his words, Ronan accidentally sliced through the plate along with the bread using the Aura Sword.

"…"

“…Honey?"

Luna stared intently at Ronan.

Swallowing hard, Ronan began to look back at Luna.

"Well, that was… you know…”

"Let's talk for a moment."

"Ah, no. Honey…”

"Come with me."

"Yes…”

Luna grabbed Ronan's arm and led him away, his face turning pale as he was dragged along.

By the way, Luna was one thing, but…

It may be obvious, but…

Ronan Artorius was no ordinary person either.

The magic power within one's body is the flame of the heart.

Since the heart is fluid, the flowing magic also takes on a fluid form.

However, when the heart no longer wavers, the magical flame of the heart will not waver either.

What I needed to do first and foremost remained unchanged.

After Ronan went outside, seemingly scolded, he shuffled into the bedroom. Luna looked at me and spoke quietly.

"Let's go for a walk."

"Ah, yes."

In fact, some time had passed since I arrived in Rezaira, but I had not had many conversations with either Luna or Ronan.

People don't usually wander around Rezaira at night. The night in the mountains comes early, and the lifestyle here usually starts at dawn and ends shortly after noon.

Although the nature of Rezaira is different, the village's way of life was not much different from rural life.

Luna walked quietly beside me.

"Do you remember the last time you cried?"

Her sudden question made me feel a bit taken aback.

Why on earth was she asking me this?

"I'm not sure…”

Have I ever cried?

Honestly, I don't remember. I probably didn't cry.

"I don't know. I don't think… I've ever cried."

As we walked through the village, Luna asked quietly.

"Then, when did you feel like you should cry?"

"…”

I've never cried, but have I ever had a moment when I thought I should cry?

Thinking about it, I felt suffocated.

I have failed many times and am still failing. Amidst these failures, I was trying to achieve some success.

Was there a moment when I should have cried?

Luna stopped walking and looked at me.

"Every day is like that, isn't it?"

"…”

"Right?"

For the first time in my life, someone's words struck my heart.

She gently touched my cheek with her hand.

"When you can't cry when you should, those tears fester and rot in your heart."

"Reinhardt."

"You couldn't cry when you should have. Every day is a day you want to cry."

"That's why."

"In the end, you don't realize your heart is broken because you lived through those days."

Holding back something.

Holding back tears.

Could it be that it only makes me sick? I looked at Luna and spoke quietly.

"Crying doesn't solve anything."

Why didn't I have any days when I wanted to cry?

If shedding tears could solve and relieve something, I would have done so without hesitation.

Tears are just tears.

There is a limit to the sadness that can be poured out and relieved with tears.

Wailing only serves as a reminder of how miserable and painful one's own situation is.

It was only to confirm how sick I was.

So, I didn't cry.

I thought that nothing could be solved with tears.

I believed that moving forward was the only thing I had to do, so I had come this far.

"If having an unwavering heart is the condition for me to advance to the next stage, then there's no need for me to cry or pour out my thoughts, is there?"

If what Ronan Artorius had said was what I needed, then tears were even more unnecessary.

Luna shook her head at my words.

"You misunderstood Ronan's words."

"…"

"There's no way a heart without emotions and an unwavering heart can be the same."

Is a heart without emotions not unwavering but indifferent?

"…"

"It doesn't mean to abandon those emotions."

Luna stared intently into my eyes.

"I can see despair, fear, abyss, and guilt within you."

"Yet, despite that, you must remain unshaken."

"Having a clear mind even while facing those emotions."

"Isn't that the mindset you must have?"

"There's a frightening battle ahead."

"It will surely bring even greater fear and terror than your current anxiety and impatience."

"If you cannot have an unwavering heart due to your anxiety and impatience now, it will be the same in the later battles."

Had she left me alone to provoke my anxiety and impatience?

If I couldn't use my power properly amidst my current anxiety, I wouldn't be able to do so in a greater crisis later.

As if giving me preliminary training.

That's why she had left me alone.

"You'll be anxious. Impatient. Your heart will grow increasingly desperate."

"Yet, despite that, you must remain unshaken."

What I'm feeling now, anxiety and impatience, are all the same in the end.

In later battles, I must face even greater fear and terror.

Things that I cannot do now due to anxiety and impatience will be even more impossible later.

So now, in Rezaira, I must find a heart that overcomes fear, not one that succumbs to it.

"And also."

As Luna lowered her hand from my cheek, she smiled.

"Tears cannot solve anything, but that's why they're necessary. I hope you understand that."

Tears can't solve anything. That's why they're important.

I felt like I knew what it meant in the past.

But the present me and the past me had changed so much that I couldn't understand what Luna meant by that.

"I think that the most unnecessary thing for a person is actually what a person needs the most, what makes a person a person, something very important."

"I'm not sure what you mean…"

"Oh dear, have you forgotten?"

Luna smiled.

"We've been talking about the heart all this time."

There's no need for a person to have something called a heart.

But can a person without a heart be considered a person?

I couldn't understand Luna's words, but I couldn't deny them either.

In the end, I had to overcome my anxiety, impatience, and fear.

If I continued to embrace a hopeless problem while enhancing my magical power alone, my anxiety would only grow.

Rather, I felt that grappling with a hopeless problem alone would only exacerbate the issue.

So, I felt the need to distance myself a little.

I needed to put some distance between myself and the myriad of problems that had crowded my mind.

The more urgent it became, the more urgency remained within me.

I needed to clear my head.

I had quite a few conversations with Luna and Ronan, but nothing changed significantly.

Luna and Ronan still left me to my own devices. They gave me hints but never directly observed me.

However, after realizing what Luna and Ronan wanted to some extent, I felt that it was unreasonable to expect them to watch over me.

Life in the mountain village was busy.

Life in the mountain village began even before the sun rose.

Ronan would lead the villagers on hunting expeditions from dawn, and it was impossible to know when he would return. Luna had to wake up even earlier to prepare breakfast and send him off.

The villagers who stayed behind also got up at dawn to tend to the fields, and Luna was no exception.

After noon, they would do laundry or chop wood; the villagers who stayed behind were not idle.

When the hunters returned, they gathered to skin the animals they had caught, dry the hides, or smoke and make sausages to store the meat. They had no time to spare.

Their days were peaceful but full.

Although I felt anxious and restless, being human, I had no choice but to say this.

"Um… Mother."

"Hmm?"

"I feel like I should be doing something too. Is there anything I can do…?"

Being a guest for a day or two was fine.

However, after almost twenty days of not helping and clinging to their hospitality, my tiny conscience couldn't bear it any longer.

From being a king in Edina to dealing with the fate of the world and now helping with labor in a mountain village – what on earth was I doing?

I wanted to escape this uncomfortable feeling of being overly conscious of the villagers' lack of scrutiny.

"You're asking sooner than I expected."

Luna grinned and handed me a bucket.

"Fill it up with water. To the brim."

What exactly am I doing here?

CHAPTER 487

Though I tried to help with the work, I didn't know how to do tasks like leatherworking or sharpening tools, so I only did simple labor.

Because of this, I couldn't assist in the work all day long.

However, this didn't mean I had completely abandoned my personal training.

I wasn't sure what wavering heart was, but unlike my previous Magic Body Strengthening, I tried to proceed with a feeling of controlling the flow of mana instead of just releasing it.

However, it was difficult to call this personal training.

Lena and Arta would always come to watch me.

"Are you going through puberty?"

"…"

I had almost forgotten about that, but when I heard such words from Arta, some long-forgotten emotions welled up within me.

Does this guy even know how old I am?

I was about to blurt that out but swallowed it instead.

But, puberty?

From the beginning, looking at my current state, I'd already passed puberty!

Seeing my expression, Arta snickered.

"Why do you get angry so easily? That's why nothing works out for you."

"Don't I look calm right now?"

This guy, I initially thought he was a calm person, but he wasn't at all.

He kept tossing annoying comments from the side.

Of course, I could crush him if I wanted to, but this wasn't like the times at the temple.

In reality, he was watching and teaching me what I needed to do, so it wasn't exactly annoying.

In fact, since the erratic flames of my Magic Body Strengthening were reacting to my emotions, I had no retort when I heard the puberty comment.

"Don't try to control your entire mana while releasing it. You're not at that level yet. First, get used to completely controlling a small amount of Magic Body Strengthening, then increase the total amount."

"Damn it, I know that too."

"If you know, then why don't you do it that way?"

"What will happen if I do it that way……!"

I was about to shout in irritation but closed my mouth.

Growing a little at a time is currently my best option.

But when, exactly, will I be able to perfectly control the immense magic I possess by doing that?

In the end, I couldn't let go of my impatience.

As I was about to flare up suddenly, Arta poked Lena and said,

"See? I told you he's got a bad temper."

"Stop poking Reinhardt!"

-Slap!

"Ouch!"

Finally, Lena lost her temper.

"I am calm."

"I attain peace of mind."

"I am tranquil."

"I attain peace of mind……”

"I am serene."

As I sat quietly on the ground at the construction site, murmuring those words, Arta's face turned pale.

“……Hey, I'm sorry. I went too far."

Apparently, thinking that I had gone insane and was speaking nonsense, Arta kept apologizing.

No.

I was trying to mix self-suggestion and word magic to forcibly attain peace of mind, not because I had gone crazy.

"Don't you think you should take a break……?"

Lena, too, thought my actions were a result of madness, and her face turned pale as she suggested that.

Well.

I couldn't deny that repeatedly telling myself to be calm might seem like the act of someone losing their mind.

The place Lena and Arta took me to rest was on the outskirts of Rizaira.

-Whoosh

I hadn't expected there to be such a massive waterfall in this area, so I could only stare blankly at it.

Down in the valley, villagers were washing clothes, and in the deep pool where the waterfall cascaded, children were swimming.

It occurred to me then that it was summer.

I hadn't been completely unaware, but it struck me how little I had been paying attention to the seasons.

"Shall we join them?"

"No, not really."

I declined Arta's invitation.

"Don't you like swimming?"

"I don't like kids."

"Ah…"

At my response, Lena nodded with a slightly deflated expression.

-Stop it!

-Cut it out!

I thought it would be bothersome to swim with the splashing children in the valley, especially if they clung to me.

I remembered the time I followed Olivia to the orphanage.

Back then, the children had clung to me, causing some trouble, and Olivia had laughed as if she found it amusing.

I wondered what had become of those children.

"…"

The more I thought about everything that had happened in the imperial city, the more despairing my feelings became.

Arta clicked his tongue at my dislike for children.

"This one seems to be the opposite of Ellen in some ways, but also similar in others, don't you think?"

"Maybe…?"

"Did Ellen dislike children too?"

At my question, Lena covered her mouth with her hand and tilted her head.

"It's more like she found them difficult to deal with."

I didn't think she'd be lively in her hometown, but perhaps Ellen maintained her stoic demeanor even here.

Arta watched the frolicking children.

"She wasn't always like that. She used to play well with kids, and even though she didn't talk much, she would go out and play with us and the children. But that changed after Ragan left."

"Is that so…?"

Ellen had changed after Ragan Artorius had left.

I tried to imagine what Ellen's past self, who supposedly wasn't like that, might have been like, but I couldn't quite grasp the feeling.

A laughing and frolicking Ellen didn't seem like the Ellen I knew.

Yet, if that were true, it didn't seem like a bad image either.

As a child, Ellen must have played in this valley, splashing in the water with the other children.

The water appeared to be quite deep.

Come to think of it, Ellen was an excellent swimmer.

Growing up in a place like this, her swimming skills must have developed naturally.

Suddenly, I realized where Ellen's swimming prowess had come from.

"I don't know for sure, but you think too much."

That was Arta's comment.

"Does it show?"

"Yes."

"Right."

Both Lena and Arta nodded simultaneously in response to my question.

"We don't know what you want or what you're really like."

“…I guess so."

"If it doesn't work out, just think of it as a break."

"A break?"

Arta stared at me.

"That's right, if nothing works out and you can't do anything, at least take a break. Not being able to rest is a terrible thing."

"Yeah, Reinhardt, you really need to take a break. You look like you have no leisure."

Both of them didn't know that I was the Demon King or the ruler of the country of Edina.

But they had continuously sensed my anxiety and impatience. That's why they could tell from my actions that I had no leisure.

To take a break.

To simply rest without a thought.

Was that even possible for me?

The days here seemed meaningless, as I gained nothing while time passed. The sense of futility in this situation returned as guilt.

However, I couldn't deny Arta's words that not taking a break was foolish.

For two years, I had run tirelessly, seen more than my share of cruelty, made brutal decisions, and faced excruciating choices.

What would change if I took a break?

How much rest would it take to bring peace to my chaotic heart?

I didn't know.

-Splash!

-Stop it!

-Ah, enough! Stop!

I watched children playing carelessly in the water.

-Swoooosh!

And I stared at the massive waterfall pouring down.

I took a break.

But I didn't know about resting.

I wanted to try something bizarre.

An action I would never normally take.

A deed that could only be done in a place like this, at a moment like this.

“Shall we swim?”

“No.”

I began to stand under the waterfall, letting the water hit me.

Without any Magic Body Strengthening, with my bare body.

Lena and Arta started to look at me as if I was a madman, standing suddenly beneath the waterfall.

-Swoooosh!

-What are you doing?

-Brother! What are you doing?

Even the children began to stare at me as if I were a strange person.

I had thought of the cliché that enlightened people gain insight by doing such things.

Of course, there was no insight, just a terrible pain as if my scalp was being peeled off.

It hurt so much, it felt like my body was breaking when I faced the waterfall without any Magic Body Strengthening.

Interestingly, the physical pain made me forget the anguish that my heart was about to shatter.

After that, I sat in meditation beneath the waterfall whenever I had time.

I knew that I couldn't become an immortal by meditating under a pouring waterfall.

On the contrary, it would be a disaster if I became an immortal. I wanted to do what I could in this world, so ascending due to sudden enlightenment would be a disaster.

I knew nothing about the meaning of asceticism and didn't understand its purpose.

All I had felt was that physical pain somewhat diluted mental anguish.

It was not asceticism based on religion or belief, but simply a physical one.

Without using any Magic Body Strengthening, with my bare body, I was hit by the giant waterfall. When I did that all day, I could hardly move due to the pain in my entire body.

In that state, I would collapse and fall asleep without any thoughts, like fainting.

"…What are you doing these days, coming back soaked all the time?"

"I'm cultivating the Way."

"…?"

Watching Luna's confused reaction to my words was quite amusing.

Enduring such pain without using magic to protect my body was extremely painful.

But the funny thing was, my physical abilities had already surpassed the level of an ordinary person long ago.

No matter how painful it was, even if I fell asleep with my body aching all over, my body would return to its original state the next day, with only a slight pain left.

It was impossible for me in my current state not to think at all.

That's why I treated my body harshly, making it unable to focus on external matters.

It was a simple and crude method, but it was undeniably effective.

It wasn't to the point where I couldn't think at all, but as I stood there being hit by the torrent of water, I could somewhat understand what a state of selflessness was.

Honestly, I didn't need such grandiose words.

It was just painful, so painful that I couldn't think of anything else.

There was a funny incident as well.

“You're acting like an ascetic just because I teased you a little about going through puberty?”

At first, Arta, who had been teasing me, now sat beside me, taking the waterfall together.

"Hmm… Should I give it a try?"

Moreover, since Arta did it, Lena also quietly entered the waterfall, wanting to try it herself.

"Kyaa!"

"Hey! You, why did you come?"

Lena, not only in pain but with her clothes half-removed by the pouring water, screamed and dashed out.

With a flushed face, Lena pulled up her clothes and returned to the village.

Arta was also shivering next to me, his lips trembling.

Though it seemed obvious, there was no doubt that Arta liked Lena.

I sat with Arta under the waterfall.

"I was born and raised here! But you're the first outsider to do something like this!"

"Who else would do such a bizarre thing?"

"You do realize it's bizarre, don't you?"

Arta laughed as he took the waterfall.

During the summer, children were always in the valley, and older brothers and older men would take the waterfall, so the children, intrigued, would sneak up and try it for themselves.

Usually, they would flee in disarray as the waterfall hit their heads, but some gritted their teeth and endured it.

"Bro! Is this fun?!"

An unknown village boy shouted at me.

"How could it be fun!"

"Then why do it?"

"I don't know!"

Why do something that's not fun but only painful?

The children asked me, but I didn't know the answer either.

However.

Every time the waterfall struck my head and body.

I could distinctly feel the layers of grime in my heart being washed away.

Swoooosh!

Though the roaring waterfall noise shook the air around me.

My mind gradually became serene.

I could clearly sense the noisy silence, as if nothing existed in the world but the sound of the pouring water.

Magic Body Strengthening is a power for battle.

I awoke to Magic Body Strengthening during my fight with Oscar de Gardias.

I awoke to my supernatural ability of Self-Suggestion, the power of Magic Body Strengthening, and the power of Word Magic, all through combat.

Thinking about it, this approach is far from ordinary.

I cannot deny that I was given such power due to the fate at work within me.

In a normal situation, I would have been severely injured or dead, but instead, I advanced to the next stage.

In the end, it felt like cheating.

The yoga master teacher, whose whereabouts are now unknown.

That teacher must have been quite skilled, as he would have taken on his own role in facing the Gate incident.

The yoga master teacher's lessons were fundamentally similar to hypnosis.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Eventually, we all fell asleep.

And when we woke up, we arose amid an inexplicable freshness.

After that, once Ellen and I had awakened to Magic Body Strengthening, we received special lessons.

The yoga master teacher did not teach Magic Body Strengthening as a means for fighting. The teacher spoke of how to control one's mind and the flow of mana.

Magic Body Strengthening is a power that greatly increases physical output, specialized for battle.

But is it really only for battle?

The yoga master teacher seemed to approach things like Magic Body Strengthening and the circulation of mana as a way of cultivating the mind.

The same went for Luna, Ronan, and Arta.

They didn't discuss the output or precision of Magic Body Strengthening but rather saw it as a matter of the heart.

They emphasized will over power.

Magic Body Strengthening was not a power that strengthened one's combat ability; rather, it was a psychological action that reveals the strength of the mind and the sophistication of the mind as the strength of the body.

I was not strong of heart.

I simply endured, endured, and endured some more.

A broken heart truly affects the body.

It could cause tears to flow easily, hyperventilation, or numbness in one's limbs. The collapse of the mind disrupts the control over the body.

Of course, the opposite is also possible.

The mind and the body share a reciprocal relationship.

Forgetting my mental anguish to some extent through physical pain is an example of this.

If so, could the opposite be true?

When a person's heart is in pain, could their body actually hurt as well?

If the mental fortitude of those with strong hearts affects their bodies,

Could a person with a strong heart convert that strength into actual physical strength?

Kwarruarruarruarruarru

The roaring sound of the waterfall hits my entire body with an intensity akin to a downpour.

So far, I have resolved everything through fighting.

That's why I thought that if I continuously used Magic Body Strengthening to exhaust and replenish, exhaust and replenish, somehow, it would work.

However, strictly speaking, I was on the path of the wicked.

Realizing strength within combat was not supposed to happen in the first place.

Such events occurred too frequently, and I gradually came to believe that it was natural to awaken power through such fateful battles.

Ellen, my goal and ideal, was also like that.

Also, I had been unable to escape the idea that Magic Body Strengthening was a mere tool and a means for fighting.

Magic Body Strengthening.

A means of channeling the magic within the body to enhance one's physical abilities.

But this wasn't an issue to approach in such a way.

Magic Body Strengthening could be approached as a tool, but it wasn't necessary to do so.

As the yoga master had said.

As Luna and Ronan had said.

As Arta had mentioned.

This was a principle, a way in which the mind and spirit affected the body through the medium of magic.

Therefore, I must approach this as an issue of the mind and spirit.

At some point, suppressing my thoughts and pushing forward rather than expressing myself, while suppressing countless worries and torments,

I thought I would deal with everything when it was over.

I decided to grieve after everything was resolved.

Next.

The next moment.

As I postponed and accumulated countless tasks, my spirit grew murky, and the suppressed emotions were left to rot, unable to be expressed.

A chaotic mind only led to chaotic mana flames, wildly discharged.

My body could withstand it because I was abnormally strong.

I was merely driving unrefined, violent power into an excessively strong frame. It was strange that I could bear it.

I could not properly control my mind.

I simply slammed the vast magic into my body like a flood.

Therefore, I could not use my body properly.

The problem originating from the mind led to issues with the control of magic and, ultimately, to problems with the control of the body.

Now, I must abandon the wicked path.

I am a hollow, rotten tree.

At first glance, I may appear massive, but my insides have decayed and died so miserably that I can no longer grow. I am a monster of sheer size.

I don't know how to let go of this pain and despair. No, I don't even know if I should let it go.

But I know that the problem was that I only endured it.

It wasn't endurance; it was avoidance.

While driving myself with the words "don't think about it yet," I had been avoiding everything.

Instead of enduring the contemplation of unanswered problems, I was avoiding thinking about them.

I still don't have the courage to confront those problems head-on, but gaining the hope that simply knowing what the problem is can make things a little better.

The pain has disappeared.

No blue light emanates from my body.

However, due to the magic wrapping around my body and enhancing my physical strength, I didn't feel the pain of the water striking me.

A pure heart.

Pure Magic Body Strengthening.

I could take that first step.

Yet it was only the first step; this is not the end.

I must move on to the next stage.

To the next level.

I can.

I will.

CHAPTER 488

The power of extreme Magic Body Strengthening, refined to its utmost limit, does not cause mana to be released.

Originally, the blue aura that envelops the body of someone using Magic Body Strengthening was a sign of incomplete combustion, caused by improperly condensed mana being released outward.

Therefore, a proper Magic Body Strengthening does not result in the release of power.

Complete Magic Body Strengthening.

I had successfully taken the first step.

Though it was only a small part of my mana, I was able to achieve an extremely refined Magic Body Strengthening, compressing the power to its limit without causing a release, within a state of calmness and tranquility.

"I thought you might have picked up some strange habits while cultivating your skills, but it seems you've made some progress on your own," Luna said, casting a slight smile at me even though I hadn't spoken a word. She seemed to have read something in my eyes.

Strictly speaking, neither Luna nor Ronan had taught me anything.

In fact, it was Arta who had given me the hint.

"Give it a try."

Since I knew what she meant, I immediately activated the Magic Body Strengthening.

A very small portion of the mana I possessed.

Not for the purpose of releasing a powerful force, but with the feeling of letting my mental state flow as the mana within my body.

It wasn't for battle.

It was the sensation of expressing a peaceful mind through my physical form.

Although there were no visible changes, the exhilaration of mana circulating throughout my body enveloped me.

The output was certainly weaker than when I exerted my full power, but I had a clear sense that it was operating at maximum efficiency.

Luna quietly observed me as I succeeded in achieving the extremely refined Magic Body Strengthening.

And then.

She pointed her thumb and middle finger at my forehead as she looked at me.

“…Mother?"

It was the posture commonly used for flicking someone's forehead.

-Snap!

"Ouch!"

With the sudden flick, my head jerked back and I crumpled to the ground.

What the hell?

Why all of a sudden?

"What! Why did you do that?!"

As I yelled in protest, Luna pointed at me with a smile.

"Just look at yourself."

"…?"

Following Luna's gesture, I noticed a faint blue aura surrounding my body.

I understood immediately what she was trying to say.

My calmness had been disturbed by the flick, and I had lost control of the mana flow, causing it to be released outward.

"It's still too early for you to use this in a real fight, isn't it?"

“…Yes."

Maintaining a peaceful mind while controlling the mana flow completely.

I needed to use this power in battle.

But with a mental state that could be so easily disturbed by a simple flick, it was impossible to use in a real fight.

After taking a few deep breaths, the released mana lost its light and disappeared. However, I hadn't deactivated the Magic Body Strengthening.

Luna helped me up.

"From now on, maintain this state throughout the entire day."

"Let your mental stability be reflected in your physical stability."

"Make mana manipulation more natural than breathing, until you can even forget the sensation of using mana."

"Do you understand?"

Maintaining this complete Magic Body Strengthening all day meant maintaining a peaceful mind all day.

It had to become so natural that I wouldn't even be aware of my own Magic Body Strengthening.

If I could reach that stage, it would mean I had achieved the level of maintaining a clear mind all day without any conscious effort or struggle.

Even without conscious effort or struggle, a clear and bright mental state is

maintained.

Soon, one enters the stage of ‘clear mirror, still water.’

"Yes."

I spend the entire day with Magic Body Strengthening activated, doing so very meticulously.

Throughout the day, I have to maintain this precise level of Magic Body Strengthening.

Is it possible?

"Well, for now, enduring a day like this is just the beginning."

I had obviously thought about it like that, but Luna's words about how this is just the beginning sounded daunting to me.

The task Luna assigned to me is quite simple.

Maintaining Magic Body Strengthening throughout the day.

The fact that my magical power is one of the greatest in the world remains unchanged. That is why I can use Magic Body Strengthening for much longer than most people.

Even if I were to output at full power in the original way, I could maintain it for at least two hours. That's quite impressive, considering the efficiency drops so much.

Thus, maintaining a day-long Magic Body Strengthening using only a small portion of my magical power should be an easy task.

Of course.

It was not easy at all.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

-Thump

"Ouch! You little-!"

"What, what's the matter? Why are you suddenly angry?"

Seeing Arta approach and tap my shoulder, I furrowed my brow, looking at the blue light of magical power emanating from my body.

It's not just about maintaining Magic Body Strengthening, but also maintaining a state of tranquility.

Maintaining that state throughout the day was by no means an ordinary feat.

For a week after receiving the assignment from Luna, I was cautious not to encounter any external stimuli.

Of course, I knew that this behavior was a misunderstanding of Luna's intentions.

What I needed to do wasn't just to stay in a corner or sit under a waterfall and maintain Magic Body Strengthening all day long, but rather to maintain the extreme state of Magic Body Strengthening even while going about my daily life.

It meant maintaining that state even while eating, having conversations, or helping with farm work.

However, I couldn't even reach that stage.

Just sitting on my bed alone, I couldn't withstand an hour maintaining that extreme Magic Body Strengthening.

After about 30 minutes, my whole body was soaked in cold sweat, and eventually, I became exhausted, and the state was lost.

It was difficult even to maintain that state alone, without anyone else interfering.

Focusing all my nerves on maintaining inner peace made me tired, and I ended up losing it.

I was experiencing a strange paradox where maintaining inner peace was destroying my inner peace.

If I thought that excessive focus was the problem and tried to disrupt it, the quality of the Magic Body Strengthening inevitably changed, and I had no choice but to return to the original method of emitting mana outward.

To begin with, the original method of Magic Body Strengthening also required extreme concentration. It was already a challenging task to become accustomed to this mentally draining Magic Body Strengthening, and now I had to adapt to a new method that required several times more concentration.

Two weeks have passed since I discovered the new method of Magic Body Strengthening.

“…This is driving me crazy."

Even in a state with minimal external stimuli, I could not maintain this state for more than two hours.

In the end, feeling that neither this nor that was working and unable to bear the frustration any longer, I met up with Arta and Lena for a day off.

"You've been whining like a sick person lately, was that what you were doing?"

“…Yeah."

By chance, Arta had seen me step outside and take a brief break after every step, worried that my focus on strengthening my magic might wane.

To the untrained eye, I must have looked like a fool.

Arta nodded as if he finally understood why I was acting this way lately.

"Magic Body Strengthening all day? Is that even possible?"

Lena tilted her head and asked Arta.

"Arta, can you do it?"

"Well, I've never tried, but I'd probably be exhausted before I could."

So, does that mean if his magical capacity allowed it, he could maintain this state all day?

Maintaining a still mind all day.

Ellen would be the one with the temperament suited for this.

Saviolin Turner, who had risen to the ranks of Grandmaster, seemed to have almost no emotional fluctuations.

Of course, Ellen's personality was naturally like that, but did people who had mastered magic body strengthening evolve to have similar, steady personalities?

But no matter how one looked at him, Arta didn't seem to be that kind of person.

He wasn't reckless, but he wasn't steady either.

"Hey, what's your secret to concentrating?"

“…Secret?"

"Yeah."

Arta didn't particularly seem like someone with extraordinary mental discipline.

However, Arta was able to use extreme magic body strengthening in real combat, even though it was just in practice.

When I use extreme magic body strengthening and maintain it, I have to be extremely cautious, even with my movements.

Naturally, I can't even dream of engaging in practice duels.

If only I could be as good as Arta, I wouldn't ask for anything more.

To my question, Arta hummed and crossed his arms.

"Well… I'm not sure if I have any secrets…”

It's true that when it comes to magic body strengthening, he is superior to me and Ellen. But in terms of actual skill, Arta could not compare to either me or Ellen.

"I don't know. I've never tried maintaining magic body strengthening all day like you."

"Well, why don't you try it?"

Lena said in response to Arta's words.

In the end, Arta joined me in my practice.

Instead of standing under a waterfall like in the past, we sat still in an empty field, maintaining our magic body strengthening.

The continuous maintenance would end the moment our concentration wavered and mana was released outward. Although we could refocus and return to that state, what Luna wanted from me was to maintain this state all day.

“…Whew, damn it."

After maintaining the state for about an hour, I grew tired.

My magical capacity was sufficient, but it felt like my mental strength was being consumed in real-time.

On the other hand, Arta sat still, concentrating without a single movement.

In the end, I focused, lost concentration, and repeated the process while sitting next to him for about three hours.

"Ugh, I can't do it anymore. I'm exhausted."

Having nearly depleted his magical power, Arta collapsed after enduring for about three hours.

I felt like my mental strength was being consumed and lasted about an hour.

Arta had no problem with his mental strength but reached his limit due to his magical capacity after about three hours.

Those were our respective limits.

"I don't really know, but is Arta really amazing?"

Lena didn't even know what we were doing in the first place, so she merely tilted her head in response to the results.

"Though I hate to admit it, he is."

"Why do you have to say that you hate admitting it?"

Arta chuckled while looking exhausted.

I don't know exactly how much magical power Arta possesses, but it's probably not very high. He just uses that power with the utmost efficiency.

This means that when I can fully utilize this method with my own abilities, I'll be able to wield a strength and endurance incomparable to what I've had thus far.

"Anyway, I really don't know. The secret to mental focus? I don't know. I really don't."

Arta, lying sprawled on the dirt ground, gazed blankly at the sky as he spoke.

The secret to good mental focus.

When I think about it, I wonder what that could be, just as Arta said.

What could there be besides being able to concentrate well?

"Hmm, I'm not really sure, but I think I know the difference between Arta and Reinhardt."

However, Lena, who had been watching both Arta and me for three hours despite her illiteracy, tilted her head and said so.

"Really?"

At Arta's question, Lena nodded.

"Arta, you don't have any thoughts."

“…Huh? All of a sudden?"

Arta was taken aback by the unexpected criticism that seemed to imply he was an ignoramus.

"And Reinhardt, you have too many thoughts."

“…Is that so?"

"So, Arta seems sort of relaxed, like he's just letting things happen, whereas Reinhardt, it feels like your whole body and eyes are straining…”

Lena looks at me.

"When I look at you, Reinhardt, it feels like I'm getting tired too."

"Ah…”

"I'm tired just watching you, so I can't imagine how tired you must be while doing it."

"Isn't it natural for the mind to lose focus if I just let myself go limp?"

At my words, Lena silently pointed at Arta, who was sprawled out on the training ground.

A real-life example of someone who can focus well even when relaxed.

I was at a loss for words in the face of Lena's simple observation.

"I do think, you know…”

Arta didn't seem too pleased with Lena's comment that made him sound like a brainless guy.

CHAPTER 489

I tend to overthink things.

On the other hand, Arta doesn't think at all.

So, when I pointed out this difference, Arta seemed to somewhat agree and nodded his head.

"To be precise, I don't think a lot. But that doesn't mean I'm dumb."

"No. To be honest, you're kind of an idiot."

"Wha-, what? Why am I an idiot?"

"Remember when you played hide-and-seek with Ellen and ended up hanging off a cliff before falling and breaking your leg?"

"Ah, no! When did that come up…?!"

Wasn't that more insane than idiotic?

I barely held back a retort as Arta's face turned red from the sudden reminder of his embarrassing past.

"No…! I did that because Ellen always won when we played games, and I wanted to win at something…!"

"Which is why you're an idiot. You might have actually died if Ellen hadn't found you hanging off the cliff. You went as far as dangling from a cliff just to win, and yet you still didn't win because Ellen found you."

"…"

Even as children, the members of the Rezaira family played spectacularly.

Like the one who would hang from a cliff just to win, and Ellen, who would find him

through sheer determination.

"Anyway, there's no end to the accidents Arta has had since childhood. Most of them happened because he tried too hard to beat Ellen."

"Stop talking about the past…”

"Do you know what happened before?"

As Lena started talking, she became excited and began to recount Arta's accidents one after another.

The story of almost drowning in a river while holding his breath during a diving competition.

The story of climbing a tree to steal bird eggs, only to fall and crack his skull.

The story of trying to imitate Ellen's diving from the waterfall I used to frequent, but landing on his stomach instead of his head and passing out.

The story of swinging a wooden sword in anger after losing to Ellen in swordsmanship and fainting after hitting himself in a vital spot.

Listening to these stories, they were almost all about Ellen.

Even in his more ordinary days, Arta was an extraordinary character. Ellen won everything, so Arta tried desperately to beat her at something, only to end up hurting himself in the process.

It was quite a novel feeling to hear about Ellen's past from her childhood friends.

Even as a child, a genius was still a genius.

At the same time, I could sense the bittersweetness of having such a genius as a friend.

Of course, one's arm bends inward.

Just imagining young Ellen playing so boisterously with her friends made me feel a bit…

A bit…

Ticklish inside.

The always stoic Ellen hadn't always been that way, and I couldn't help but wonder what she was like back then.

It would have been cute, I bet.

But such thoughts only made me feel more depressed.

No matter how I thought about Ellen or how Ellen thought about me.

Our relationship could never return to how it used to be.

"Anyway, you've hurt yourself countless times trying to follow Ellen or trying to win against her. You should know when to stop."

"Stop… just stop…”

Depending on how you saw it, Ellen could be considered an unlucky childhood friend, but these two didn't seem to hold any resentment toward her.

"Arta really lives in the moment. He doesn't care about what might happen later; he just wants to beat Ellen and try everything she does, even if it means getting hurt in the process."

Arta could not refute Lena's dreadful declaration.

"You've always had a lot on your mind, Reinhardt."

A lot on his mind.

That was something Lena and Arta often told him.

A clear mind, calm disposition, and a tranquil attitude.

Maintaining these was becoming increasingly difficult.

It had been more than a month and a half since he left Edina.

He still had no idea when he would be able to leave this place with a satisfactory achievement.

A month from now? No way.

Two months? Or three months?

If he gave in to his anxiety and left Rezaira, he would never be able to return.

Now he knew Luna's intentions.

If he could not endure the anxiety and impatience, he would not be able to achieve his next goal. He had to overcome this situation and move on to the next stage.

Even if he managed to reach the master class, he would not be able to utilize his full strength if he lost to fear and terror in the final battle.

That's why Luna was training him.

If he couldn't maintain his calm in this situation, the inevitable would happen later.

No matter how impatient or anxious he was, he had to reach the next stage and make that power his own.

Thus, he was forced to spend anxious hours, cut off from all external information.

Nevertheless, his anxiety and fear only grew, never diminishing, due to the unknowns he faced.

So, although he could concentrate and achieve extreme refinement of his Magic Body Strengthening, it was difficult to acclimate to the environment due to the ever-increasing anxiety over time.

Having too many thoughts was the problem.

However, he couldn't stop thinking even if he wanted to.

It felt like hearing the saying "rice isn't the only thing in life when the throat is full of grape juice."

Telling him to calm down when he could barely breathe, as if it was that simple.

"In situations like this, shouldn't we act more like Arta?"

"…"

"There's no point worrying about next year's drought while harvesting this year's potatoes."

Lena's words were not wrong, and he knew as much.

"Thinking too much makes you worry about unnecessary things. So, why not temporarily forget about other matters and focus on what needs to be done?"

At those words, it seemed as if a light bulb had gone off in his head.

Many people had said the same thing to him.

At one point, he had said it himself.

After his first murder in Darkland.

Ellen, covered in blood, grabbed his face and stared straight into his eyes.

Telling him now was not the time to think.

Just do what needed to be done.

After the Gate incident, Harriet told him the same thing.

Now was not the time to think, just do what needed to be done.

He had thought the same way and tried to move forward one step at a time.

But now that he had left the responsibilities he should have borne, he had lost the mindset he had held up to this point.

Worrying about what might not happen, but could.

Feeling anxious about the very situation of being cut off from the outside world.

Despite knowing that it won't solve anything, he compulsively thinks.

Luna said his heart had become ill because he had endured too much for too long.

Lena said there was no need to think about things he didn't need to think about right now.

He didn't know whether Luna was right or Lena was right.

All he knew was that the anxiety and impatience he felt could not solve any of his problems.

Arta focused only on the task at hand.

His goal was to maintain his Magic Body Strengthening for an extended period of time, so he paid attention solely to that enhancement.

I should do the same.

Pondering how long it would take to grow accustomed to this power, what the situation outside would be like, and other such thoughts were all meaningless.

Worrying would not provide answers.

Only action.

Since only action could produce results, it was time to abandon fruitless concerns.

"Alright, I'll give it a try."

Inner peace.

Finding inner peace in a situation where it was possible held no meaning for me at this point.

Attaining inner peace even in circumstances where it should be impossible.

That was the clarity and unshakable resolve I needed.

Thinking that I shouldn't think.

The thought of not thinking was, in itself, a thought.

While it seemed like a nonsensical endeavor, I was actually doing it.

To stop thinking, one shouldn't think about not thinking but should genuinely stop thinking altogether.

However, for someone whose mind was about to explode with thoughts, the compulsion to stop thinking only induced anxiety.

And as I entertained such thoughts, I naturally began to ponder what I shouldn't be thinking about.

This led to a stage where I considered what thoughts I should avoid, only to return to the starting point of thinking that I shouldn't think about such things.

It was a Moebius strip of thought, driving me to the brink of insanity.

"Mother, how can I stop thinking?"

"…?"

I had a method in mind, and I intended to try it! Why not just teach me something, anything!

"Come with me somewhere tomorrow."

Was she finally going to teach me something?

The next day.

My hope that Luna would finally teach me something crumbled from the morning.

-Clang

I heard Luna rummaging around in the storage room.

"Take this."

She emerged with shovels, pickaxes, axes, and a lever.

“…Weren't you going to teach me swordsmanship or meditation?"

"I don't think I ever said that."

Luna took the shovel while I held the pickaxe, axe, and lever.

I silently followed behind her as she led the way.

Luna crossed the mountain ridge that marked the boundary of Rezaira and continued walking.

Our destination was another mountain ridge.

"We need to create new farmland. Prepare yourself for a long and arduous task."

“…Pardon?"

"You asked me how to stop thinking."

Luna gestured to the spot in the heart of the forest.

"Nothing is better for clearing your thoughts than a seemingly endless amount of work."

No way.

Is she seriously telling me to create new farmland?

Is this just a ploy?

"Start by cutting down the trees in the area and transporting them to the village. After that, we'll have to uproot everything."

Not only were we starting from bare ground, but we also had to turn a forest into farmland.

"But don't use any divine artifacts."

That's too much!

"Mother… is this really necessary?"

"Hmm…"

At my question, Luna crossed her arms, tilted her head slightly, and looked at me.

"If you keep calling me 'Mother' but don't actually act like a son, how can I treat you like one?"

"Ah."

Luna smiled at me.

"Son, get to work."

I had fallen for it.

So, Luna began to give me tasks while telling me to act like a son.

In the countryside, it was true that children were considered labor force, so I couldn't exactly deny her words.

Luna ordered me to work and left me in the forest on the outskirts of Rezaira before disappearing in a flash.

It wasn't just a grassy plain; it was a forest.

If I cut down all the trees in this forest and split them into firewood, I'd be providing all the wood Rezaira would need for the entire year.

Wasn't this about more than just creating new farmland? Wasn't she having me make new farmland while also producing a huge amount of wood?

On top of that, I wasn't allowed to use the divine artifact.

I looked at the forest before me, the axe, the pickaxe, the shovel, and the sled beside me.

I needed to cut down these trees, split them one by one, and carry them to Rezaira on the sled.

I had to cut down all the trees and somehow remove the roots.

Once that was done, I had to use the pickaxe to overturn the ground, removing all the remaining roots and preparing it for cultivation.

But could I finish all of this before winter arrived?

I shouldn't have run my mouth.

Now I might not be able to return to Edina within the year.

"Hmm…"

I had never cut down a tree with the divine artifact, and since Luna told me not to use it, I didn't intend to.

I picked up the axe, intending to start by cutting down the trees.

I had slain countless monsters, and though it was gruesome, I had even cut down people.

But naturally, I had never used an axe before.

I was going to cut down trees.

I knew it was a tough task, but who am I?

Without Magic Body Strengthening, I had a strength rating of over 26, A+ rank, and with Magic Body Strengthening, I could exert an S rank power or higher. I was a monster.

I didn't know whether this task would make me forget my worries and bring me a serene state of mind.

But I had to do something.

"Hooooo…"

I concentrated my mind and used my highly refined magic body strengthening.

I had more than enough strength.

The important thing was not just cutting down trees, but becoming familiar with precise magic body strengthening.

As I used my magic body strengthening in a highly concentrated state, I cut down the trees.

There were many trees.

I didn't know if I would become familiar with this power by the time I had cut down all these trees.

I took that first step.

With a quiet breath.

Amidst the gentle breeze and faint chirping of birds.

"Ha!"

I swung the axe at the tree.

-Crack!

It broke.

"Uh…?"

Not the tree, but the axe handle.

CHAPTER 490

"It's broken…”

"Yes…”

Luna stared blankly at the axe, which had snapped in the middle of its handle.

"Son?"

"Please don't call me that…”

At the same time, I found out why Luna hates being called ‘mother.’

It felt so strange!

Of course, just like me, Luna pretended not to notice.

"Rezaira isn't a place abundant in resources, you know. Do you have any idea how precious even a single axe or hoe is?"

"I'm sorry…”

I'm in trouble.

It was ridiculous that Luna had almost killed me.

The existence of the Demon King posed a great threat to Ellen, and since Ellen could die, Luna had tried to kill me.

But now, two years later.

I'm being scolded by Luna for breaking the axe handle.

Even worse, I'm apologizing with my head bowed as if I had committed a grave sin.

What is this?

What kind of situation is this?

I feel dizzy.

In many ways, I can't help but feel uneasy and disoriented.

"So, you must have relied on your brute strength, swinging it around carelessly, and this happened. Is that correct?"

“…Yes."

Her accuracy was chilling.

"You're always restless with anxiety and neurosis, and you can't even do the tasks you're given properly. You're really good for nothing."

Since coming to Rezaira, all I've done is whine and complain.

However, to say that I'm good for nothing…

Even so…! Outside…! There are many things that I need to do…!

I couldn't help but keep my mouth shut, knowing that saying anything would only make me sound pathetic.

As the king of Edina and an Archdemon.

Humanity's enemy.

And here I am, being treated as useless in a remote village for breaking an axe.

Luna sighed deeply, went back into the warehouse, rummaged for a while, and brought out another axe.

"This one's a bit old, so you'll have to be more careful with it."

The first axe Luna gave me wasn't quite S-class, but it was around A- class.

However, this one felt considerably older, not only the blade but also the handle.

"How am I supposed to cut trees with this…?"

"Well, you wouldn't have to if someone hadn't broken the other one in the first place."

"Maybe an axe with an iron handle or something… Is there anything like that?"

"…"

"Yes, I'll go…"

You really think there would be something like that?

With that all-too-revealing look in her eyes, I had no choice but to take the downgraded, worn-out C-class axe and head back to the forest.

Strictly speaking, I didn't need the axe.

I was told not to use the divine artifact, not my body.

With maximum Magic Body Strengthening, I could kick down any tree that wasn't particularly large.

But doing that would be a disgrace to the language.

I'm trying to get used to a new Magic Body Strengthening through this task, not just following Luna's order to create new farmland.

The moment I do that, my priorities become skewed.

I need to focus my mind and let go of distracting thoughts to become familiar with this new power.

If I concentrate only on cutting trees and plowing fields, it would be worse than not doing it at all.

Holding the axe, I focus my mind.

"Huuu…”

If I put too much strength into it, it's not the tree but the axe that will break.

The method for cutting trees.

I don't know how to do it, but at least I've learned one thing.

If you strike too hard, the axe will break.

Use the right amount of force.

Just right.

Swing the axe toward the tree.

-Thwack!

The tree's bark peels off modestly.

The axe doesn't break; the force was controlled properly.

But now, the tree has only been slightly stripped of its outer layer.

How many more times must it be struck before the tree falls?

And then, splitting the fallen tree into transportable sizes.

Loading them onto the sled to carry them to Rezaira.

Cutting down another tree.

Splitting it.

Carrying it.

"……”

-Chirp chirp!

I look at the vast forest before me.

Once all the trees are done,

Digging up the roots of the great trees and pulling them all out.

Plowing the land and tilling it…….

I wanted to become a master class.

Why did I end up a lumberjack apprentice?

"Damn it."

-Thwack!

I threw the axe and lay down on the ground.

My hyper-focused Magic Body Strengthening has already been released. No, it was repeatedly released and reused while I was using it.

A tree?

I haven't felled a single one.

My strength isn't simply immense.

My agility and dexterity have long surpassed those of an ordinary person.

So, without missing, I could accurately strike the same spot I had targeted.

But the crucial factor was power.

Not knowing how durable the axe was, I couldn't hit the tree hard enough, so the notch I made in the wood wouldn't deepen.

I held back the urge to shatter the tree with my bare hands several times.

Finally, exhausted, I collapsed.

Lying on the forest floor and catching my breath, I heard laughter from somewhere.

"I told you he'd be like this, right?"

"Well, he doesn't know any better, so it can't be helped."

Arta and Lena's voices echoed from afar.

Lying there, I saw Arta and Lena's faces appear above me.

"What is it……”

"Luna said you'd be struggling, so she asked us to check on you."

"Do you want some water?"

Lena offered me a water container.

The moment I broke an axe, Luna seemed convinced I was incompetent.

I drank the water Lena handed me.

"Even so, haven't you managed to fell even one tree yet?"

Arta looked incredulously at the shallow notches in the trees and the lack of any fallen trees.

"No, I'm worried if I use too much strength, the axe will break."

"Do you have to use an axe?"

"I thought it would be better to use an axe to get used to focusing my mind as well……”

"Hmm… I see."

Arta examined the notches in the tree and shook his head.

"It's not a matter of strength; you're using the wrong method. Who cuts down a tree like this? Let me see."

Arta reached out his hand, and I handed him the axe I had discarded.

"Watch closely."

Holding the axe, Arta aimed it at the tree trunk.

"From the top to the bottom."

-Thwack!

As Arta swung the axe down, a shallow notch formed in the tree, and the bark was slightly stripped away.

After one swing, Arta looked at me again.

"Now, from the bottom to the top."

-Thwack!

As Arta struck precisely, a piece of wood fell from the interlocked points of the two hits.

All I could do was stare blankly at the triangular piece of wood that had fallen.

Only twice.

Those demonstration moves made me realize what I had been doing wrong.

"You can't just haphazardly chop down a tree. You really think that would work?"

I had been hacking away at the same spot.

Felling a tree was more like whittling one down. Arta clicked his tongue as he looked at me with disbelief.

"What's this? You city folk really don't know how to do anything, do you?"

"Ah, no… it's just…"

Me.

I mean, I had been pretty good back at the temple.

I was considered one of the empire's best talents, wasn't I? Though I wasn't actually from the empire.

I hadn't been called incompetent since the very beginning of my first year!

Somehow.

Here in Rezaira, I was treated like a fool who couldn't even properly do the most basic tasks assigned to me.

And it wasn't because of any mysterious secrets or special powers in the village.

I was just considered a fool because I didn't know how to chop down a tree.

"No… where on earth would I ever need to chop down a tree?!"

That's right! Before I came here, and after, where would I ever need to chop down a tree?

It was only natural for me not to know!

Arta chuckled at my protest.

"That's exactly why I said you're a city boy."

"…"

I was upset, but he had a point, so I couldn't argue.

"Anyway, good luck. I have to help my grandfather today."

"Yeah, Reinhardt. I have to take care of my little sister today too."

Leaving those words, Lena and Arta went on their way.

Grandfather.

Now that I thought about it, it was inevitable for this village with a small number of households and no population change to be comprised of large families.

Anyway, thanks to Arta's demonstration, I now realized what I had been doing wrong.

To fell a tree, you don't just hack at the same spot; you need to adjust the angle and chip away at it little by little.

There was actually skill and know-how involved in the seemingly simple task.

What Arta had shown me was just the basics, and there were likely more detailed methods of chopping down a tree.

Tree-felling techniques.

There was no use for me to learn them, and even if I mastered them, there was nothing to gain.

Once I left Rezaira, I probably wouldn't need to chop down trees for the rest of my life.

How did I end up doing this?

A city boy.

Just because I don't know how to chop down a tree, I get teased, and scolded for breaking an axe.

Back in Edina, we struggled to find ways to feed and take care of the few survivors who arrived by boat, dealing with murder cases, and deciding how to handle the criminals.

All of humanity seemed to hate me.

Even if I survived the Gate incident, and beyond that, I might have to fight Ellen, and

there might be war between the Darklands and the Empire.

I had only ever talked about death and the thin line between life and death.

In reality, I had to kill countless people under the guise of stabilizing the system and society.

Now, here I was, chopping down trees in this remote mountain village, trying to create a field.

Being called a city boy who knows nothing, having to listen to such stories.

Scolded for breaking an axe, and accused of not being able to do anything right.

"Sigh…"

Somehow.

I felt like I had become an ordinary person, and a bitter laugh escaped my lips.

I never thought it would be like this.

Having left Edina, I was neither the Demon King nor anything special.

I was merely a strong but ignorant city bumpkin who knew nothing about rural work.

It is said that position makes the person; in a place where I cannot be king, nobody regards me as one.

No one admires or worships me, and so, no one hates or despises me either.

I wondered if an ordinary life could still be possible for me.

Leaving aside whether I could live such a life, I wondered if I could even entertain the idea.

Nobody demands that I be their king.

Nobody looks to me for hope or despair.

I am neither an Apostle of Tu’an, nor a champion of Als, nor the Demon King.

I don't think it's okay to forget them just because I don't hear anyone looking for me.

However, the very thought that I wasn't much in reality brought me a sense of relief.

Although I am an existence that is almost synonymous with the origin of this world, I am neither omnipotent nor omniscient.

Not every matter in the world is something I must resolve, nor can I.

It was arrogant of me to have tried to concern myself with everything that happened in the world.

I was merely arrogant.

I felt anxious in this situation where not every circumstance was under my control.

How foolish I was, feeling anxious about everything in the world slipping through my fingers, while not even knowing how to fell a single tree in front of me.

I am not in my throne in Edina right now, but in the mountain village of Rezaira.

I can think about what needs to be done on the throne when I return to it.

Even if everything were in my sight, it doesn't mean I could resolve it all.

Thanks to Luna and Arta speaking about my incompetence, I realized how arrogant my thoughts were.

The duties of a king belong in the king's place.

While in the position of a city bumpkin, I should do what city bumpkins do, and learn what I don't know.

At last, my muddled mind seemed to cool down somewhat, and I felt like I had some understanding of what true clarity of mind meant.

There may be things I don't know while I'm here.

So what?

I do my best in my imagination.

Luna Artorius said to trust her.

So, I trust in Luna.

There is nothing else.

If Luna keeps calling me son, I should act like a son.

So.

The task of a son now is to turn the forest into a field.

And the first step is cutting down trees.

We will turn the wooded area into an empty lot, and plow the empty lot into a field.

I don't know what this will mean for me in the end.

I decided to give up thinking in Rezaira.

Since Mother told me to do this, there must be some reason!

I don't know about the rest!

I've had to take responsibility for too many things up until now, so it's okay to avoid responsibility this time.

"Heh, hehe……"

For some reason, I remembered my crazy days at the temple, jumping around like a mad dog, and burst into laughter.

Realizing that inner peace comes not from some great enlightenment or a huge event, but from being treated as a useless person.

No matter the process, isn't it the result that matters?

I believe that Luna Artorius has a plan.

In truth, I am quite useless and don't know much.

So, I will only do what I am told and clear my mind.

Although I spent all day tormented by worries and dilemmas as a king, now I am a guest in Rezaira.

So, I only need to do what I am told.

Using my head unnecessarily won't improve anything, nor will it increase my knowledge.

I pick up the axe.

I didn't know the method before, but now that I know it, it's easy.

There's no need to exert excessive force.

A modest amount of Magic Body Strengthening, controlling that power to the utmost.

From top to bottom.

-Swoosh!

My hand movements are precise, and controlling the power is not difficult.

Aligning with the notch created by the axe.

This time, from bottom to top.

-Swoosh!

I look at the wood chips that have been flung away.

Only a small piece has been chipped away.

However, I have undoubtedly made progress.

-Swoosh!

-Crack!

-Thud!

Gradually.

More and more.

I'm chipping away.

I may not yet know what inner peace and a clear mind are.

But in emptying my mind, I have undoubtedly succeeded.

Within the sensation of only needing to do what I was told, the distracting thoughts that tormented me were falling away like the wood chips being chiseled off.

There are many trees.

There are as many trees to cut down as there are distracting thoughts to eliminate.

I will level this forest, uproot the roots of the great trees, and overturn the soil.

I will turn this forest into land suitable for planting something.

Like planting new seeds in new soil.

I will uproot the despair and anguish deeply rooted in my heart.

No, even if I cannot uproot them.

I will plant a new spirit within the crevices of that despair and pain.

CHAPTER 491

Summer rain had fallen.

Swoosh!

Although the rain pouring in the forest wasn't torrential, it was enough to discourage outdoor activities.

Luna Artorious, clad in a raincoat, listened to the sound of impacts coming at regular intervals through the downpour.

Slowly, Luna approached the direction of the sound, cutting through the rain.

Crack!

And Luna saw a tree trunk breaking and falling to the ground.

Mechanically, the young man approached the fallen tree and resumed his axe work.

Chopping wood in the rain was dangerous.

The handle could slip from his grasp, and the blade might slip and twist, causing serious injury.

However, the young man seemed to ignore such dangers, repeatedly striking the axe down at regular intervals.

On the first day, it seemed like quite a struggle.

On the second day, the old axe handle finally broke, so he had to borrow one from another house to chop the wood.

Once Ronan inserted a new handle into the nearly-worn-out axe and provided a new one, the work sped up.

Since Reinhardt, who possessed extraordinary strength, had to transport the

chopped wood to Rezaira alone, there was no helping the slow pace of his work.

Two weeks since Reinhardt began clearing the forest.

Luna could see that one side of the forest had been completely cleared.

There were still more trees to chop, but progress was undoubtedly being made.

Luna approached Reinhardt and spoke quietly.

"Reinhardt, it's raining. Take a break today."

Thud!

The sound of rain was abundant, but it wasn't enough to drown out Luna's voice.

However, Reinhardt kept striking his axe at regular intervals as if he hadn't heard anything.

Luna stared silently at his back.

His figure seemed to think of nothing else but swinging the axe.

Thud!

She watched him focus solely on splitting the chopped wood at regular intervals, as he could only accomplish the task with an axe.

"Reinhardt."

Although Luna called out again, Reinhardt continued his axe work, seemingly unaware of anything else.

"…"

It wasn't that he pretended not to hear.

He genuinely didn't hear her.

Luna silently watched Reinhardt's back, then turned and walked away.

Thud!

As Luna left, she heard the sound of the axe at regular intervals.

Late at night.

In the gray void, the council chamber.

"Lord, how long do you plan to let the boy stay in Rezaira?"

A white-haired elder leaned on his cane and asked Luna.

Ronan sat beside Luna, who was seated at the head of the table, with the residents of Rezaira in front of them.

None of their faces showed discomfort with Reinhardt's presence in Rezaira.

Just curiosity.

An unmistakable curiosity was etched on everyone's faces.

More than a month, almost two months.

Everyone was puzzled by the situation of the boy staying in Rezaira and the Lord's decision to allow it.

"Until the child gets what he wants."

The atmosphere in the council chamber became chaotic at Luna's calm words.

"Lord, if it's your decision… there must be a greater purpose we don't know about… but hasn't this never happened before…?"

An old man couldn't help but shake his head in confusion.

"Precedent…"

Luna lowered her eyes and remained silent for a moment.

For an incalculable length of time, there had never been such a precedent.

Luna gazed once more at the faces of those seated in the meeting room.

There were elders, those soon to enter old age, and those of middle age.

"It was also unprecedented that Ragan was able to leave for the world, knowing of the existence of the Sun and Moon clan."

As the leader herself mentioned her already deceased son, everyone's expressions turned ashen.

"My lord… Ragan could go out into the world because he did not learn the mysteries of the Sun and Moon clan… Just like Ellen…"

"I spoke of precedent, not mystery."

Luna quietly said so.

"Through Ragan's case, we have come to know that it is not unusual for a new precedent to be set in an unprecedented situation."

Everyone fell silent at Luna's words.

"So, there's no rule that says we absolutely mustn't have such a new precedent either."

"But, my lord, what if something goes wrong…?"

Luna interrupted the worried words of the elderly woman.

"I should be the one prepared for that, not you."

A silence settled over the room at Luna's composed words.

"Besides, even without me, will the Sun and Moon clan disappear? You all simply need to serve the Sun and Moon as you have learned thus far and live that way."

"My lord… You are the only leader of the Sun and Moon clan."

At the elder's teary words, Luna gently smiled.

"Is it not true that there doesn't necessarily have to be no precedent for choosing a new leader among you?"

Everyone wanted to say something to Luna's words, but no one could refute her decision.

After everyone left the meeting room, only Luna Artorious and Ronan Artorious remained.

"My lord, do you intend to teach the child the mysteries?"

At Ronan's words, Luna shook her head.

"No, doing so would bind the child to the constraints of the Sun and Moon clan. How could I do that?"

Luna quietly looked down at the floor.

"Whatever the child desires, he must realize it on his own."

"So, you will intervene with time instead?"

At those words, Luna silently gazed at Ronan.

“…You knew."

"I didn't know the details, but somehow I had a feeling you would do so."

“…Yes."

Luna quietly stared at the passage to the crypt.

"All I can give that child is time."

"…”

"Isn't meddling with the time of Rezaira interfering with the world? In the world where I intervened with time, outsiders arbitrarily entered."

At Luna's smile, Ronan awkwardly smiled back.

"It sounds like sophistry."

"Yes, it's sophistry."

"Would it not have been alright to tell Reinhardt that time flows differently here from the outside world?"

"I suppose."

Unknowing, Reinhardt must spend his time in anxiety and unease.

"If he knew that time flowed differently here, the child would gain leisure. He would gain peace and find mental tranquility sooner, and he would have had time to rest his exhausted body and mind."

"But an easily acquired peace would inevitably shatter just as easily."

"Only when peace is hard-won will its permanence also be steadfast."

"If he gains leisure and peace easily and mistakes it for his own strength, when true chaos and fear arrive, he will crumble."

Hearing Luna's words, Ronan slowly nodded.

"So you deliberately didn't tell him anything."

"Overcoming limits and achieving goals are different things."

Upon hearing Luna's words that Reinhardt needed to overcome his limits rather than achieve his goals, Ronan fell silent.

The sound of the axe chopping through the wood at regular intervals echoed in Luna's head.

"Ronan."

"Yes, my lord?"

"Do you think you would be sad if I were to disappear?"

At Luna's question, Ronan nodded with a solemn expression.

"Of course. I would be."

"…"

"You've always been a cheeky one, haven't you?"

"…"

"However, the life of a human being, forced to live because of you, hasn't been too bad. No, it's been quite good, actually."

Luna gazed silently down the corridor.

"Since I've been forced to live a human life, I've been having thoughts of wanting to experience the end of humanity – death."

"My lord."

"It's just something I've been pondering."

Seeing Ronan's serious expression, Luna let out a faint chuckle.

Time passed.

Reinhardt continued to chop wood.

In truth, if Reinhardt were to use his maximum magical output and divine artifacts, he could have cleared the entire forest in a single day.

However, he had to maintain an extremely refined Magic Body Strengthening and chop each tree one by one using an axe.

Thus, Reinhardt's work inevitably progressed at a slower pace, with more deliberate movements and using inferior tools than usual.

Maintaining a clear mind throughout the day was not an easy feat, of course.

Naturally, there were times when his focus waned, and he was often flustered when the axe blade detached from the handle, disrupting his concentration.

Nevertheless, there was no doubt that he was improving.

His concentration, which was once exhausted after only an hour, soon exceeded two hours, then three, and finally, four hours.

Eventually, he could maintain his focused state not only while chopping wood all day but also while taking a break and catching his breath.

Around two months after he first started chopping wood, Reinhardt had cut down all the trees in the forest.

"I can't believe you finished all of it."

Arta said, looking at the remains of the forest, now only a collection of tree stumps.

"But you got faster towards the end, didn't you? It was incredible."

At Lena's words, Reinhardt silently nodded.

He placed the worn-out axe, which had its handle replaced several times, onto the cart. As he stacked the last few logs onto the cart, Reinhardt clicked his tongue.

"If someone had told me back then that this kind of labor would help me attain mental clarity, I would have laughed in their face."

Grumbling, Reinhardt pulled the cart filled with logs.

"What annoys me the most is that it actually works."

The abyss-like darkness in Reinhardt's eyes hadn't completely disappeared.

However.

Those emotions were now utterly serene.

"You've finished chopping all the wood?"

"Yes."

"It took you quite some time."

"I'm not sure if two months is considered quick… but isn't it decent? I've never done anything like this in my life."

It took a full two months.

Luna looked puzzled upon hearing that Reinhardt had singlehandedly completed the enormous task of clearing the forest. Ronan simply nodded in agreement.

"Then, starting tomorrow, we'll have to remove the tree roots."

"…"

Really?

Couldn't they just say 'well done'?

Seeing Luna casually mention that there would be more work starting the next day, Reinhardt felt a sudden surge of frustration.

No.

Having been here for a while, he sometimes forgot who he was, even though he knew he shouldn't.

It was quite absurd to feel upset about not receiving praise for cutting down all the trees.

Could it be that I have become too accustomed to living in Rezaira…?

Honestly, there were times when I would suddenly wake up from sleep, fearing that I would eventually collapse from this aimless life.

Although I've put aside thoughts about the outside world for now, there are still occasions when I have nightmares.

However, I've noticed that my mind becomes clearer after repeating simple tasks throughout the day.

"Your expression has improved a lot."

That was what Ronan said.

"Is that… so?"

"Yes, definitely."

No matter what happens or how it happens.

Amidst anxiety and impatience swallowing me up, I was getting used to maintaining my composure and sustaining the highest efficiency of Magic Body Strengthening for long periods.

"Thanks to you, we seem to have enough firewood to last us until next year."

According to Luna's words, it seemed like I had only done good things for Rezaira.

And I don't see why that should be a problem. After all, it is true that I am living off Rezaira.

The villagers would often commend me for my hard work whenever they saw me piling firewood in the village center, and many of them would even leave some snacks for me.

Rather than remaining as a burden, I'm doing good deeds for myself while helping the village.

There's nothing wrong with that.

Before I knew it, I had become a part of a rural community called Rezaira.

As a result of cutting down all the trees in the forest, Rezaira no longer needed to worry about firewood.

Looking at the huge pile of firewood drying crisply under the sun, I felt an inexplicable sense of pride welling up within me.

If everything wraps up nicely…

If all matters are resolved, and the burden on my shoulders disappears…

I suddenly thought about trying something like farming.

The Demon King, farming.

Just thinking about it made me chuckle at the absurdity.

Anyway, after a long and arduous time, I had finally finished cutting down trees.

Of course, that didn't mean I was parting with my axe forever.

Instead, two more tools were added to my arsenal.

A shovel and a pickaxe.

The trees in the forest were diverse.

There were large Arem trees, medium-sized ones, and even small trees that would break just by me grabbing and shaking them with my bare hands.

Let's set the small ones aside.

"Honestly, even I find this challenging."

"Do you now?"

"Of course, this isn't an ordinary task."

Staring at the sturdy base of a tree, whose roots seemed to stretch indefinitely, my mind felt overwhelmed.

How on earth could I uproot this?

Don't I need heavy machinery for this? Isn't this a job for an excavator?

In order not to dig blindly into the ground like when I first started cutting trees, I even brought Arta along, but even he shook his head in disbelief.

Ignoring the gigantic Arem tree with an overwhelming base, I stood in front of a slightly smaller tree.

Upon consideration, I realized that this task was part of a series of processes.

The repetitive practice of cutting trees served to clear my mind of distractions and helped me become familiar with the optimal use of Magic Body Strengthening.

So now, I was quite accustomed to it.

This time, it's about that.

Increasing the output of the optimized Magic Body Strengthening itself.

Uprooting trees with deeply embedded roots doesn't require equipment; it requires technique.

But there's no way such tools would be available in this rural area.

So, I had to rely on my strength to accomplish tasks that required technique.

Maximizing the efficiency of magical power and increasing its output, I become accustomed to converting all of the magical power into my strength without releasing any of it externally.

When I think about it, there must have been a reason Luna asked me to create a field…

No way.

It's like interpreting a dream.

I'm simply assigned a task, and I'm the one giving it meaning.

"I've never done this before either, so I might need to call the adults for help."

"No."

This isn't a matter of technique; it requires raw strength.

"First, we do it crudely."

“…What?"

-Thud!

I thrust my shovel into the ground.

To create a groove deep enough to grip the tree's base.

-Thud! Thud Thud!

After a few digs, I expose the tree's roots to some extent.

“…I see what you're trying to do, but can you really do it?"

"If it doesn't work, we'll think of another way."

I squat down, standing on the tree stump.

Then, with my arms lowered, I grasp the battered part of the tree's base as if it were a handle.

Arta's expression wasn't very good.

“…This doesn't look good."

"We'll try, and if it doesn't work, we'll find another way."

Although I don't know how it'll turn out with maximum output Magic Body Strengthening, since this is also part of my training, I use Magic Body Strengthening with the highest efficiency and an output that won't let the magic leak out.

I can already feel my magical power efficiency has increased drastically.

From now on, the task is to increase the output itself while keeping the control of the magic entirely in my hands.

With overwhelming strength, I pull out the deeply rooted tree with my bare hands.

"I am a human excavator."

"Excavator…? What's that?"

"It's a thing."

Using self-suggestion and word magic as well.

"Ugh!"

Feeling the blood rush to my head, I attempt to pull out the tree stump with my bare hands.

Tensing my thighs, arms, and waist.

"Uuuggghhhh!"

"You're crazy…"

-Twitch

I'm not sure, but there's movement.

It's happening.

It's about to happen.

If there was no movement at all, I wouldn't know, but I have a feeling it's working, so I put even more strength into it.

I pour out enormous strength, feeling as if the veins throughout my body might burst.

Not pulling out the tree, but pushing the earth away with my legs and pulling up the world, that kind of concept.

With all my might.

And yet, I keep cramming the overflowing-with-rationality mana downward.

"Guh."

"Ah."

"Ah."

"Ah!"

Screaming, I exert a force I've never used before.

-Snap!

Something broke.

"Uh… ugh…"

"Hey… Are you okay?!"

Certainly, something did break.

It was my back.

CHAPTER 492

My back gave out.

As a result, Arta had to carry me to Rezaira on his back.

"Ugh…”

"Who else in the world would be such a fool…”

Luna sighed deeply as she applied a hot towel to my aching back.

She must have heard Arta's story about how I ended up in this state trying to uproot a tree with my bare hands.

"Mother… If I use Tiamata… I can heal…”

Although anger is necessary to use Tiamata, I've become quite accustomed to it.

Can't I draw out Tiamata's divine power by being angry at myself for my foolish actions?

-Ugh

-Slap!

"Ouch!"

As I summoned Tiamata while lying down, Luna slapped the back of my hand.

"Did you forget what I said about not using the divine artifact?"

"But this is an injury…”

Isn't it okay to use it since it's an unavoidable injury?

As I slightly turned my head to object, Luna shook her head with a stern expression.

"No. Reflect on your foolishness and rest for a few days. What would you have done if your back had broken?"

"Well… It's not a big deal since I could recover quickly…”

Just moving my body slightly made my back scream in pain, making me feel like I was losing my mind.

In response to my objection, Luna gently pressed down on my back, where the hot towel was placed.

"Ouch! Stop, stop, stop!"

"You might think it's easy to recover, but it leads to thinking it's okay to get hurt easily. Isn't this proof?"

"Ouch! Please, save me!"

She said so while removing her hand from my back, and then looked at me.

"No matter how easily one can recover from injuries, there is no one who should get hurt easily."

"…”

"Don't take it for granted that you'll get hurt in order to achieve something. That's your weakness."

Somehow.

It seemed like she was more concerned about my heart than my body.

Whether my attitude of enduring pain too easily was pitiful, worrying, or perhaps pathetic.

In the end.

I followed Luna's instructions and didn't use Tiamata, resting for a few days while lying down.

I also thought about what it meant to take pain for granted just because it's too easy to escape from it.

Somehow.

I kept remembering the day Ellen stabbed me in the heart.

I lay there for about three days.

It was an unexpected rest, even if it was due to an injury.

Although it was an injury that could be healed immediately with Tiamata, I pondered Luna's words during those three days, that just because I could recover easily didn't mean it was okay to get hurt easily.

Luna, of course, and Ronan also checked on my back.

They gave me something similar to physical therapy, which felt like intense pain followed by relief.

To be honest.

I almost passed out.

Perhaps due to Ronan's treatment and my basic physical strength, my injury was fully healed in just three days.

"Honey, go with Reinhardt this time."

"Ah, I should."

Perhaps they thought my back would give out again, so they sent Ronan with me.

From being incapable of cutting down trees to recklessly trying to uproot tree roots and injuring my back - was I now seen as a reckless fool?

Somehow, I didn't mind that treatment.

As we arrived at the forest where the logging was completed, Ronan stood at the base of the tree that had caused my back injury.

"It's not about uprooting the entire tree."

Ronan silently began digging around the tree stump with a shovel, scraping away the parts where the roots were not entangled.

As he dug up a fairly wide area, soon the deeply embedded tree trunks revealed themselves. By inserting a pickaxe and repeatedly digging up the ground, the entire form of the roots, which were terrifyingly deep compared to what was exposed on the surface, became visible.

"Do you see how absurd this task you were trying to accomplish is?"

“…Indeed."

Ronan started cutting the even deeper embedded stems one by one with an axe.

How much time had passed?

Soon, Ronan lifted the bottom part with a pickaxe several times and pulled out the enormous tree stump.

"This is how it's done."

"Hmm… I'm not sure if I can do it properly, but let's give it a try."

While logging required some level of skill, this seemed to demand even more.

From logging to uprooting tree roots.

Having demonstrated once, Ronan tossed the uprooted tree stump aside and dusted off his hands, as if there was nothing more to teach.

Honestly, having seen it once, there was no need to see it again.

But curiosity arose.

"Um… Father?"

"Do you want me to show you again?"

"No, it's not that. I'm just curious about something."

I pointed to another tree stump of a similar size to the one we had just uprooted.

"Can you show me how to uproot it without doing this, just using your strength?"

"…?"

I was genuinely curious. Wasn't it possible for Ronan?

It was clear that he was much more skilled than me.

"Hmm… Even if I do it like that, I'm not sure you'll be able to follow…"

"Have you never tried?"

"…"

Ronan looked at me blankly in response to my question.

Oh, did I cross the line?

What he thought of my words, I do not know, but suddenly, Ronan rolled up the sleeves of both arms.

Ronan Artorius.

Perhaps a simpler man than I thought?

Until now, he seemed to have not used any power, including Magic Body Strengthening, and it was impossible to pull out those tree roots with the strength of an ordinary human.

It was almost the same as what I had done a few days ago.

He dug around the tree with a shovel and grabbed the roots.

Like Arta and like the recent power I started using, no blue light was felt around Ronan.

However, just looking at him, it was clear that Ronan Artorius was about to use an immense amount of power.

Just watching made my skin tingle.

"Inhale!"

-Grrrr!

In my case, my waist would have snapped, but it was different for Ronan.

As if the entire ground was being pulled up, Ronan's feet began to dig into the ground, and the sound of something breaking and snapping echoed in succession.

-Whoosh!

He pulled out the massive tree from the ground with his bare hands.

I could only stare blankly at the huge tree roots with the broken and snapped roots dangling.

-Thud!

Ronan threw the tree roots he pulled out with his bare hands at me.

"Can you do it?"

"No, not at all."

The human excavator was right here.

After showing me twice, Ronan left, and I was alone.

I tried it out, wondering if I could do it.

To cut to the chase, I was able to do something similar to what Ronan did.

Unleashing maximum output by pouring in all the magical power I had.

-Thud!

"Phew."

I tossed the uprooted tree stump and released the Magic Body Strengthening.

It was clear that my strength was on par with Ronan's.

However, I couldn't be satisfied with this level of power.

If I could unleash this kind of strength even in this state, how much more could I achieve in an extremely stable state of Magic Body Strengthening, with maximum output?

I would possess a power on a whole different level than what I have now.

So, I began by uprooting the trees.

After logging, came tree uprooting.

Then, overturning the ground.

Quite a bit of time had already passed.

But, once again, I had to melt time away and take the next step.

Focusing my mind, maintaining a stable state for Magic Body Strengthening.

More stable, more precise.

For a more perfect power.

Thwack!

I drove the shovel into the ground.

Uprooting the tree roots took even more time than logging.

Due to the nature of the work, requiring deep digging into the soil, and my inexperience, I had to go through a lot of trial and error.

But, without a doubt, progress was made as time was invested.

And as time was invested, my concentration only improved.

At some point, I was able to maintain a refined state of Magic Body Strengthening throughout the entire process, from starting to finishing the work.

"Would it be better not to disturb him?"

Lena, who had been watching Reinhardt digging from afar, asked Arta.

"I'm not even sure I could disturb him if I tried."

Lena and Arta, who had come to talk, were watching Reinhardt digging the ground and cutting the tree roots with an ax from a distance.

"At first, I wondered what he was doing, but the more I see him, the more relentless he is."

Arta shuddered as if he was fed up.

As if under a powerful hypnosis, Reinhardt, focused on his work, acted like a blind and deaf person.

He couldn't hear anyone calling him, and he only concentrated on his tasks, regardless of what was happening around him.

A terrifying level of concentration and immersion.

Arta could no longer keep up with Reinhardt's focused state.

Lena glanced back at the place where Reinhardt was.

"What could have made him like that?"

Although he had succeeded in focusing his mind, Reinhardt's actions could not hide his desperation.

Both Lena and Arta knew this.

In cutting trees and uprooting tree roots, there was no choice but to read a desperation bordering on madness in Reinhardt's pursuit of the next stage while focusing on his tasks.

What story could there be?

What kind of event was ahead of him?

That made him so desperate.

"I don't know."

Arta said quietly.

"It's probably better for us not to know. Definitely."

"…"

Reinhardt's desperate madness.

Arta believed that it was related to something outside, and if so, it was better for them not to know.

Arta shivered as he turned back to Rezaira.

"It's getting cold."

"It is."

Autumn was approaching.

CHAPTER 493

The early arrival of night in the mountain village signified that the season had come quickly as well.

When the brutal, chaotic, yet delicate and violent task of pulling out every tree root from the forest after logging was complete, an early winter had come to the mountain village.

Time had passed.

It had passed too much.

In such thoughts, all that Reinhardt could do was to simply carry out the tasks he had to do.

He had already grown accustomed to maintaining his Magic Body Strengthening throughout the day. It had become a stage where he could maintain his Magic Body Strengthening more naturally than breathing.

Reinhardt, who had already entered that stage, could even maintain his Magic Body Strengthening while sleeping.

Unconsciously, his Magic Body Strengthening was always maintained.

Now that the task of pulling out the tree roots was done, turning over the soil and filtering the remaining roots and stones would mark the end of the work Luna had assigned him for the summer.

Yet, not satisfied even at that stage, Reinhardt thrust his shovel into the forest.

-Clang!

However, the metal blade of the shovel struck the ground, producing an unpleasant sound.

"…"

The early winter had frozen the ground.

-Clang!

Reinhardt, who had thrown down his shovel, now picked up a pickaxe.

-Thunk!

Instead of digging into the ground, the pickaxe collided with the frozen earth.

Once again.

-Thunk!

The swung pickaxe struck the exact same spot as before, colliding with the ground.

How many times had he swung like that?

-Thunk!

As he lifted the pickaxe that had dug into the ground, the soil beneath was revealed.

"…"

As if entranced, Reinhardt turned over the soil and picked out stones, throwing them away.

As if there were no other tasks for him to do.

As if he had forgotten all other tasks except for this one.

-Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!

Reinhardt, swinging the pickaxe as if possessed, and the faint blue mist of mana emitted from his swinging pickaxe.

And so, one day.

Two days.

A week.

A fortnight.

A month.

Naturally, as winter deepened, the work of breaking, crushing, and digging into the increasingly solidly frozen ground became more and more difficult.

The task of digging and leveling the ground became one of breaking and crushing the frozen earth.

Even when snow fell on the mountain village, Reinhardt remained in the forest.

Without using his divine artifact or the flame of Tuesday.

As if facing his fate, Reinhardt broke the ice in the pouring snow and dug into the ground, even as the snow turned to ice.

“The snow is falling too heavily. At least wait until it stops.”

Unable to bear watching Reinhardt digging with a shovel and pickaxe in the open ground during winter, Luna grabbed his shoulder and spoke.

“Ah…… When did you arrive?”

Reinhardt, seemingly unaware of Luna's arrival, replied with a drained expression.

Due to the heavy snowfall, enough to sink one's feet, Luna was also covered in snow from walking through the knee-deep snowfield.

However, upon seeing Reinhardt, Luna forgot her words.

Reinhardt did not have any snow piled on his head or shoulders despite the heavy snowfall.

The snow that touched his head, face, and shoulders melted away because his body was overheated.

“You didn't answer no matter how much I called.”

“Ah…… Really?”

“Yes. Do you realize how ridiculous you look right now?”

Luna covered her mouth and laughed as she looked at Reinhardt.

“How ridiculous?”

“You look like an angry teapot.”

The sight of steam rising from his head was no different from a boiling teapot.

"Take a break today. It's an order from the village chief of Rezaira."

“…Yes."

At Luna's words, Reinhardt walked along the steep mountain path, carrying a pickaxe and shovel on his shoulders.

"It's not a job for winter. Haven't you ever thought that?"

Luna, who had been walking ahead, spoke up.

Reinhardt, of course, knew what she meant.

Naturally, leveling the ground was not a job meant for winter.

It was something that had to be done when the ground thawed, and it was time for sowing.

But as if cursed, Reinhardt had to do the hardest job at the hardest time.

"That's why I like it more."

Reinhardt followed Luna, carrying the pickaxe and shovel, and said.

If the task was easy, the reward would come easily as well. However, by doing a difficult task during the hardest time, there was more to gain.

"I'm glad you think that way. I was worried you might think I gave you this hard job

just to torment you."

“…You didn't?"

At Reinhardt's words, Luna sighed deeply while walking ahead.

"Well, I know you're a twisted fellow by now. But I can't say I had no intention of tormenting you at all. I did want to give you a bit of a hard time."

"I know very well that you, Mother, can be quite mischievous in your ways."

At Reinhardt's remark, which was quite similar to an attack, Luna furrowed her brow.

“…You never let anything slide."

"Why should I?"

"Know when to yield."

Luna walked ahead, as if she no longer wanted to engage in the conversation.

The snow had piled up to the point where walking was difficult, and as the heavy snow continued to fall, their steps were even more sluggish.

After trudging through the snow for a while, Luna spoke softly.

"Aren't you worried about matters outside?"

At some point, Reinhardt had become so absorbed in his work that he never mentioned anything about the outside world.

Now, Luna had to be the one to ask him about it.

"You told me to trust you."

"I did. I certainly did."

"If something goes wrong, I'm going to think it's all your fault, Mother."

"…"

Luna stopped in her tracks and looked back at Reinhardt, taken aback by his sudden nonsense.

Luna's gaze narrowed as she stared at Reinhardt.

"So, you found peace of mind by deciding to blame me for anything that goes wrong? As long as you follow the path you're supposed to take, you'll feel at ease?"

"Ah…"

"I'll blame you for the rest of my life if something goes terribly wrong later. Just so you know."

"Seeing your stubbornness, you must have been in Rezaira for quite some time."

At Luna's words, Reinhardt chuckled.

"I have been here for a while."

Reinhardt looked at the snow falling off the tree branches.

He had stayed in Rezaira for two seasons.

"I'd love to have something warm for dinner tonight."

"…Looking at your growing audacity, it seems you've become too comfortable."

-Thwack!

"Ouch!"

Luna smacked Reinhardt in response to his words, clicking her tongue.

"Don't get too comfortable in Rezaira."

Luna added as she walked ahead quietly.

"You'll have to leave someday."

He had to leave.

At Luna's words, which seemed to draw a line, Reinhardt's expression hardened.

He had to leave Rezaira as soon as possible.

But at some point, in a corner of his heart, he realized he didn't want to leave.

Luna's words had just made him realize something.

Although I didn't know much about rural life, I had come to learn that in the mountain villages, winter was a time when the ground froze and the lives of the residents froze along with it.

In places where all four seasons existed, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that life in the mountain villages was dedicated to enduring the winter, a season when everything froze.

Preparing preserved food and storing grains were all acts carried out to prepare for the winter when food could not be easily obtained.

Thus, the villagers' activities during this time were extremely limited.

There wasn't anyone else like me, who seemed to be possessed by something and kept at it relentlessly.

Winter was both a long period of rest and a time of anxious anticipation for it to come to an end.

Of course, since Rezaira wasn't an ordinary rural village, the villagers had strong vitality, and there was no issue with food.

Firewood for the winter?

I had prepared enough this summer to last until next year.

The village's firewood storage was filled with an enormous amount of wood that I had chopped and the villagers had dried.

People would burn the firewood they had prepared during the past season, nibble at the stored food, and wait for the frozen ground to thaw and the new spring to arrive.

However, since it was snowing heavily now, the villagers were busy clearing the snow.

"Go up on the roof later and clear some snow."

"But you told me to rest."

"…"

That's right.

Why are you trying to make me work as soon as I come back when you told me to rest?

Luna's lips began to jut out slightly.

Look at this.

This.

Her sulking because she has nothing to say.

"Fine, rest. If the roof collapses because of the snow that's piled up overnight, you, who sleeps on the second floor, will be the one to get hurt the most."

"Mother, do you know this? People can be really petty when they pretend not to be."

"I know that very well."

Her calm admission of it made her seem the pettiest.

"I used to think you and Ellen had the most similar faces, but now I see that your personalities are even more alike, right?"

"…Our personalities?"

At my words, Luna tilted her head as if she had never heard such a thing before.

"Yes. You both sulk and jut out your lips when you have nothing to say and subtly say things as they are."

"I don't want to admit it, but if we judge by your usual behavior, you're insulting both your mother-in-law and your wife at the same time. Truly an extraordinary son-in-law."

"See, this is what I mean. This is how you sulk."

"Fine, you're very skilled at making people's tempers flare. Let's drop it since you're in the wrong."

The fact that we could have such a casual conversation made me realize how long I had been in Rezaira.

We walked along the path the villagers had cleared of snow. The snow kept falling, so we would have to keep clearing it.

When would this heavy snow stop?

"Did we really resemble each other?"

That was Luna's sudden question.

"Yes, you did."

People wouldn't be unaware of the resemblance.

Perhaps she was thinking about the fact that I had said their personalities were alike as well.

Looking at Luna's expression, she seemed pleased to hear that she resembled Ellen and smiled.

"Isn't it pretty normal for parents and children to resemble each other?"

"Hmm. I suppose so."

Luna continued to smile.

"But isn't it all the more mysterious?"

"The fact that a being resembling me, yet not me, can originate from me."

"The fact that a being, born from me but not me, can be born and live."

"How beautiful it is."

"Sometimes, I find it too marvelous and endearing."

I didn't fully understand Luna's words.

Perhaps it was because I had no children of my own, or maybe Luna was thinking on an entirely different level.

"Why do you like Ellen?"

It was a sudden question.

Perhaps it was due to the snowfall, but for some reason, Luna and I talked more than usual today.

Why do I like Ellen?

I had been in Rezaira for quite some time, but she had never brought up the subject.

I had been avoiding the topic because I knew that one day I would have to confront Ellen, and so had her father, Ronan.

Why do I like Ellen?

I thought about it for a long time, and there was only one answer I could give, though I had pondered it alone as well.

“…I don't really know."

Honestly, I couldn't say when or which event had been the decisive factor that made me feel that way.

I didn't know either.

There was nothing else to say beyond the fact that it just happened at some point.

"A satisfying answer."

"I'm not sure if it was a good answer, but I'm glad you think so."

"Isn't it because you've spent so much time together that you can't properly explain it?"

"Is that… how it works?"

"Of course."

Luna walked with a smile on her face.

What will become of everything in the future, and what is happening now?

It wouldn't be enough just to have a good past without a good future.

-Ah! Ahh!

-Save me!

People were busy clearing snow, but the children who knew nothing of it were happily playing, building snowmen and throwing snowballs.

Snowball fights.

And snowmen.

Naturally, something came to mind.

"I once made a snowman with Ellen."

“…Really?"

"It wasn't so much a snowman as a human-shaped snow sculpture… More like a snow person. When I asked her what it was, she said she always made them that way with her brother."

"Ha, yes. Both of them had extraordinary dexterity."

Luna laughed, reminiscing about a long-lost memory.

I regretted mentioning Ragan Artorius only after I had spoken his name.

"Arta and Lena tried to imitate it too. Lena gave up, saying she couldn't do it, and Arta tried so hard to make a better snowman than Ellen that he stayed up all night and caught a severe cold… That's when Ragan helped Arta make the snowman… Yes… That happened…"

Luna spoke with a gentle smile.

"Those days… existed…"

Her voice was tinged with both sorrow and joy as she recalled memories of the past.

"I'm sorry."

Luna turned to look at me after hearing my words.

"Bringing up a pleasant memory is nothing to be sorry about."

Luna continued walking.

"Thank you, Reinhardt."

I felt as if I had been accepted as a family member by Luna at some point.

I couldn't tell when or on what day it had happened.

It simply occurred at some point.

As if I didn't know that exact moment.

There was no way Luna could know either.

What would it have been like if Ellen had been here?

It would have been nice if that were the case.

On a winter day with heavy snowfall.

I couldn't help but force a bitter smile as I imagined a scene that could never exist.

CHAPTER 494

In the end, the snow piled up on the roof had to be cleared.

Seeing the dangerously thick layer of snow on the roof, Luna's words seemed true; one could actually die, crushed by a collapsing roof. Unable to sleep with this realization, there was no choice but to deal with it.

Never in his life had he imagined having to clear snow from the roof due to such a heavy snowfall.

According to Luna, it was not an exaggeration; roofs really did collapse under such heavy snow, and it happened quite frequently.

Clearing the snow from the roof, which was not just a moderate amount but piled up to a person's waist, was an incredibly daunting task.

The process involved cutting through the snow with a shovel and removing it one scoop at a time.

When enough snow was pushed to the edge of the roof, it was dumped down below.

Whoosh!

The sound was so terrifying that one might think it was the noise of the snow falling.

As he cleared the snow, he began to understand why roofs collapsed when it snowed heavily during the winter.

In the end, he had to clear the snow without a break until the sun went down.

It was not only him but also the other villagers who had to do the same. The village paths were blocked, making it impossible to move without clearing the snow.

But when there was only one last heap of snow left on the roof,

"Huff!"

As he quickly pushed the thick pile of snow down,

Whoosh!

"Reinhardt…!"

Looking down, he saw Luna, who had been hit by the avalanche of snow and was staring back up with a frozen expression.

"Ah… well, you see…"

Thump! Thump!

Luna, who had just been bombarded with snow, brushed it off her head and shoulders, narrowed her eyes, and sighed.

"…Go eat dinner."

For a moment, he really thought she was going to be crushed.

Just as they had wanted, dinner was a meat soup with wild vegetables and thinly baked bread.

He was slowly getting used to the rustic but warm meals of the mountain village.

"I don't know when the snow will stop," Luna commented.

Ronan nodded in agreement.

Until the snow stopped and melted, all activities in Rezaira would be limited to those that could be done indoors or within the village.

Knock, knock

During the meal, they heard a knock on the door. Upon opening it, they found Lena holding a pot.

"Ah, Reinhardt. Grandma said to give this to you."

"Please tell her thank you, Lena."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Since the village was like a tight-knit community, it was common for people to share their meals. Luna had often made extra food and asked them to take it to other houses, so he had been on this errand quite a few times.

Occasionally, Lena and Arta joined them for dinner, and there were many times when they were invited to Lena and Arta's home.

The pot Lena handed over contained apple pie.

Sometimes, the dinner menu expanded to the point where it was difficult to manage.

The concept of neighbors, which had become a foreign idea to him, was still alive and well in Rezaira.

Naturally, the dinner menu included the additional dish as they ate.

Having spent a long time in Rezaira, he frequently encountered the other villagers besides Lena, Arta, Ronan, and Luna.

Like Arta's older brother, Dalen.

Or Lena's younger sisters.

Their parents, and grandparents, too.

Even if it wasn't Lena or Arta, they knew almost everyone living in Rezaira.

It wasn't a neighborhood with many people, so remembering names wasn't difficult.

Always too many numbers. Too many names.

There were too many names of the departed to remember, but everything in Rezaira was too few.

Realizing that the saying about knowing the number of spoons in a neighbor's house wasn't wrong in this environment felt strange.

A village with too few people to control, resources to manage, and situations to encounter.

Someone might dislike the sight of being too close to neighbors.

But after living under the long-standing compulsion to memorize and know countless numbers and people, the time spent in Rezaira felt like a final vacation.

However, there were still some strange things.

There were quite a few elderly people in Rezaira.

This place was inevitably a large family due to generations living in the village.

Rezaira didn't seem to reject outsiders, so although it was isolated now after the Gate incident, it didn't seem like it was always such a village. Otherwise, it would have perished long ago.

But what I was curious about was something else.

Arta and Lena, and of course, their grandparents had many siblings.

A large family.

However, the leaders of Rezaira.

Luna Artorius and her spouse were the only two.

There were no parents for Luna or Ronan. Ragan had died, and Ellen was outside.

But even if they were alive, I didn't know why only they were a nuclear family.

Could there be some reason for this?

"How is the work progressing?" Ronan asked.

"Ah… It seems like we'll have to wait for the snow to melt, but if we continue like this, it should be done before winter ends."

"I see."

Winter made things difficult, but it was true that the work was gradually picking up speed. Everything could be finished before spring arrived.

Who knows what would happen then?

I began to feel like I didn't want to leave Rezaira, but the fact was that I had to.

By the time winter ended, I hoped to have accomplished something.

When I first arrived in Rezaira, Luna had said that even if I became a little stronger here, it wouldn't make much difference.

I agreed with Luna's words.

I haven't reached the Master Class yet, but even if I do, could I face the monster that appears at the end?

However, I couldn't just stand still, and the fact that I hadn't reached that level yet meant that there might be new possibilities in Rezaira.

Even reaching the Master Class, the chances were slim.

In the end, I could only rely on the power of the relics.

By now, I knew quite a bit about the hidden powers of the relics.

Tiamata grants powerful divine power, allowing for simultaneous use of healing and destructive power.

Ellen's Lament wields the power to cut anything.

Alsbringer is the ultimate relic that can summon the power of a god, but it takes a life as a price.

I didn't know how the true power of Lapelt worked.

Tiamata's keyword was anger.

Lament's keyword was sorrow.

Alsbringer's keyword was sacrifice.

Lapelt's keyword was hatred.

If even reaching the Master Class still left my chances of survival slim, shouldn't I find some other way?

"I have a question for both of you."

At my words, Luna and Ronan both looked at me.

"Go ahead."

"Ask away."

If the clue is in the artifact.

"Do you know where the Holy Spear, Alixion, is?"

I know its shape, having seen it in books.

The last artifact shaped like a spear.

The relic of Riter, the god of courage.

Where is Alixion and what is its true power?

These two seemed likely to know.

I had only briefly glimpsed information about Alixion while researching artifacts like Tiamata in the past, and I didn't know much about it.

All I knew was that it was an artifact shaped like a spear.

Of course, even if it were in my hands, I don't know how well I, who have only wielded swords thus far, could use it.

But the true power of that artifact might grant me a slim chance.

Their answers to my question were simple.

"We don't know."

At Ronan's answer, Luna shook her head as if she didn't know either.

Was the fact that the Sun and Moon clan had stored the Lapelt related to its name?

But their "we don't know" seemed a bit different from simply not knowing.

Luna cautiously took a spoonful of the meat soup and spoke.

"To be exact, no one can find Alixion."

"So… does it not exist in this world?"

"No."

Luna shook her head.

The one who answered was not Luna, but Ronan.

"Alixion is an artifact that comes to you."

"It comes to me?"

"Yes. It comes to those who need it. That's why throughout its long history, Alixion has rarely appeared in the world."

The concept of it coming to you, rather than searching for it, felt rather unfamiliar.

It was also quite strange that we were discussing an artifact, one of the most important items in the world, in a snowy mountain village.

"If I need it, it will come to me… So if I need Alixion, it will appear before me?"

"If that were the case, anyone in the world could have used Alixion. Alixion does not respond to ordinary desires."

"And what is that extraordinary desire?"

Luna took over for Ronan.

"It's a relic of Riter. What do you think is needed?"

Ah.

"Courage… is it?"

"That's right."

So it means that it's an artifact that appears and reacts to the desires of those with courage, as it is a relic of the god of courage.

Courage, huh?

Aren't I on the courageous side, if I really think about it?

Wasn't it a courageous act to actually seek out the person who almost killed me and ask for their help, even if it was a desperate move?

Don't I have the qualifications to be the master of Alixion?

I might be overconfident, but I definitely think so.

Seeing my puzzled expression, Luna looked at me with a stern face.

"Reinhardt, what do you think is the most important thing in courage?"

“…Pardon?"

I didn't understand Luna's words for a moment.

"What's the most important thing in courage… What else is there besides courage? Bravery? Confidence? Something like that?"

Seeing that I didn't understand, Luna shook her head.

"Suppose there's a terrifying enemy. For example, let's say there's a dragon from another world, like you mentioned. It's a fearsome enemy that you absolutely cannot face with ordinary means."

“…Yes."

"Suppose you stand up to it anyway, knowing that you can't face it. You confront it with the mindset that, somehow, you'll make it."

“…Yes."

"Do you think that's courage?"

If that's not courage, then what is?

I held back from saying that, sensing Luna had more to say.

It was not Luna who continued, but Ronan.

"That is not courage, but recklessness."

At those words, I was at a loss for what to say.

"What is needed for recklessness to become courage?"

Luna stared into my eyes quietly.

Recklessness and courage.

The difference between them.

I thought about the difference between the two concepts, which I had never seriously considered.

Recklessness and courage are, strictly speaking, very similar words. The concept of facing or opposing something is the same in both.

However, recklessness inherently includes foolishness.

Why is it foolish?

It's foolish to believe that one can face an insurmountable opponent.

Then what makes courage different?

When recklessness loses its foolishness, it becomes courage.

Recklessness devoid of arrogance and foolishness.

The recklessness of a wise person who accurately understands their own power.

"…"

Facing something despite knowing it's impossible, and knowing that it's difficult.

If the foundation of courage is facing something while fully understanding it.

I couldn't help but realize what the most important thing in courage was.

"Fear… it is."

"That's right."

What makes courage truly courageous is not bravery, pride, or determination.

Knowing the opponent.

Fearing the opponent.

Facing them despite that fear.

That was the true condition of courage.

CHAPTER 495

I am afraid of the final battle.

I fear the day when I might have to face Ellen in combat.

In my current state, I believe I am no match for either Ellen or the dragon. As it stands, I must rely on Alsbringer to sacrifice my life, which is why I have come to Rezaira, seeking the next step.

Regardless of what I achieve here, I will participate in the final battle.

Thus, what I possess is not courage but rather arrogance or obstinacy.

Because I have the Alsbringer, all my actions are inevitably arrogant.

Since I have resolved to use the Alsbringer in the end if everything goes awry, I cannot possess true courage.

"Fear and terror, you don't abandon them. Instead, you face them while embracing that fear and terror. That's what courage is," Luna said.

I slowly nodded my head in agreement.

It's not about letting go of fear or forgetting terror, but embracing them and facing your adversary despite feeling suffocating fear and dread.

That was the condition to be chosen by the Alixion.

The Alixion is a sacred artifact similar to the Alsbringer.

Just as Alsbringer chooses someone who can die for the world as its master, the Alixion appears in response to the desires of those who show true courage.

If I can understand and display true courage before the otherworldly dragon, will the Alixion appear before me in response to my desires?

But then, what changes?

"What is the true power of the Alixion?" I asked.

"A sacred spear that seeks those who face insurmountable foes with genuine terror and yet stand against them. What do you think it would grant such a person? What would they need?" Luna replied.

It's a divine gift bestowed upon those who display true courage.

Have the conditions already been met?

True courage, drawn out by genuine terror.

That is what it can and must give.

"Power to confront anything, no matter the opponent."

Luna's words were clear.

"That's all."

The reckless fighter who overcomes fear and terror and stands against their foe needs nothing but power.

The Alixion lends power to confront anything, no matter the adversary.

No matter how strong the otherworldly dragon is, if chosen by the sacred spear Alixion, one can obtain power to stand against it.

In a way, isn't the Alixion the ultimate divine artifact?

If I were granted the Alixion, all this hardship might become meaningless.

But it's ironic.

Knowing about the Alixion has made the likelihood of obtaining it all the more uncertain.

Relying on the Alsbringer in the final battle is not courage but arrogance and obstinacy.

Hoping the Alixion will find me in the final battle and standing before the enemy is also far from true courage.

Rather, because I now know that the Alixion responds and chooses based on true courage, I can't be sure that my own courage will ever be pure.

Ignorance is bliss, indeed.

It was a perfect match.

It would have been better if I didn't know. It's not that Luna and Ronan told me when I didn't want to know; I asked directly.

I shouldn't expect that the Alixion will definitely be mine.

Deliberately fearing the enemy and feeling terror while pondering the nature of true courage is also a foolish act.

If the Alixion chooses me, there may not be a situation to warrant it, but if not, I must stand before it nonetheless.

Alixion, being a powerful artifact, had not made many appearances thus far.

To expect it would be a luxury.

Even if some strong fate were at work for me, it was unlikely that Alixion would conveniently appear in a favorable situation.

Therefore, I do what I must.

The snow had not ceased.

Before venturing into the forest, I had cleared the snow piled up overnight in the village and on rooftops, along with the villagers.

Not only at Ellen's house but also the roofs of other villagers' houses. After all, there were places in Rezaira that needed the help of a young hand.

"Reinhardt! Come down and have some ginger tea!"

"Yes, Granny!"

Having been a guest for so long, I was occasionally treated as one of the villagers.

It was quite amusing.

Now that I am revealed to be the Demon King, there is no one to treat me as before.

However, if it were the days when I was the Temple's rascal Reinhardt, what would they think seeing me favored by grandmothers and grandfathers in the countryside?

No, it is even more amusing that the Demon King does such things.

If someone were to broadcast my appearance like this throughout the continent, would they realize I am not that dangerous?

The Demon King chopping wood, the Demon King uprooting tree roots, the Demon King going to the fields, the Demon King clearing snow.

As my life in Rezaira grew longer, various thoughts began to cross my mind.

After the snow clearing was roughly finished, I headed toward the forest over the snow-covered mountain with a shovel and pickaxe in hand.

It was amusing that I insisted on going to the fields on a day when the snow piled up so much that it was difficult to walk properly, but honestly, I liked it.

The more challenging the task, the more focus is required.

Thus, harsh situations were good for me, and there was no reason they would be bad. After all, going to the fields was my goal, but not my purpose.

"Damn it."

Of course, that's just talk. Seeing the snow-covered path to the Rezaira border, which was quite far from the cleared land, my foot sinking deep into the snow, and the path disappearing from sight, it was frustrating.

If I used the Flame of Tuesday, I could have melted not only the path in front of me but also all the snow piled up in the village.

I thought about just closing my eyes and using it, but in the end, I didn't and began wading through the snow.

What I can do, Luna can undoubtedly do as well.

I still don't know what the Sun and Moon clan wants and what they do, but Rezaira fundamentally doesn't use mysterious powers in daily life.

Should I call it naturalistic?

Out of respect for the way of life in Rezaira and Luna, I don't intend to use powers that don't belong here.

Using the Flame of Tuesday would have made many things easier.

To begin with, I could have melted the freezing ground and started clearing the land, so the land-clearing work would already be finished.

But I didn't do that.

By not doing so, I was now able to maintain the extreme efficiency of Magic Body Strengthening throughout the day and even while sleeping.

Now that I've come this far, I can't use the Flame of Tuesday just for convenience.

I know now that there is a definite value in inconvenience.

"Ugh."

Still.

It was indeed uncomfortable…

Left alone, the fallen and accumulated snow would slowly melt and turn into ice.

Scooping out the snow and breaking the frozen layer underneath with a pickaxe, Reinhardt carried on with the tedious and lengthy task of clearing the path.

Snow that fell in the mountains during winter hardly melted. Usually, such snow would slowly melt away only when the next season arrived, suddenly disappearing on a warm day.

That's why, even though heavy snow had not fallen for several days, one could still find snow anywhere in Rezaira throughout the winter.

Amidst such days, Reinhardt continued to follow the mountain trails even after the villagers had cleared the snow in the village, and the children had stopped having snowball fights. He would only return home when the sun began to set.

Thus, another day, two days, a week, and a month passed.

His work pace remained slow.

No matter how strong his physique, there was a limit to the durability of his equipment, so he had to regulate his strength. Regardless of how much he adjusted, the shovel blade would still bend or the axe blade would break on occasion.

In a state close to trance, Reinhardt repeatedly struck the shovel and pickaxe into the ground, prying out rocks.

One day, after having mechanically performed such tasks for several days as if he had forgotten what he was doing.

That day, as winter passed and the snow piled up in the forest and mountains began to sublimate at the start of spring.

On one such day, as the snow waited to melt alongside the signal of warmer weather.

Luna had been watching Reinhardt.

She had been watching him from just a step behind, but Reinhardt was completely unaware of her presence.

Thud!

The shovel was easily embedded in the frozen ground.

Whack!

Luna quietly observed the pickaxe blade piercing the ground as if slicing through tofu, rather than colliding with it.

"Congratulations, Reinhardt."

"…?"

Upon hearing the sudden voice from behind, Reinhardt turned around, dumbfounded.

"Congratulations?"

"Yes."

Luna pointed at the shovel Reinhardt was holding.

"Have you not entered the next realm?"

A blue mana light shimmered on the shovel in Reinhardt's hand.

"What, what is this?"

"…"

Reinhardt had been so focused that he didn't even realize he had surpassed the wall at some point.

Luna smiled as she saw Reinhardt staring blankly at the shovel in his hand, wearing a dumbfounded expression.

"Stop plowing the earth; it's a meaningless task for you now."

"…"

Hearing Luna's words, Reinhardt looked around, still in a daze.

The vast forest had been almost completely cleared. Reinhardt, who had been dumbfoundedly observing the impressive yet humble achievement he had accomplished over a long period, turned his gaze to Luna.

"Can't I just finish the little that's left?"

"…"

Rather than being happy about becoming a Master Class, Reinhardt seemed more reluctant to leave the task he had been given incomplete.

"If you really want to do it, go ahead…"

Perhaps due to the strange antics he had engaged in for such a long time, Reinhardt had developed a peculiar stubbornness.

"Then hurry up and leave; you're in the way."

"…"

Whack! Whack!

After saying that, Reinhardt began to furiously dig into the ground once more.

—---

As I had reached the Master Class, my work speed could not help but increase drastically.

Having acquired the strongest shovel and pickaxe, I could now use my full strength.

In the end, I managed to complete the remaining parts of the work I had been doing throughout the winter in just one day. Breaking and cutting through the frozen ground.

Thus, Luna's instruction to plow the field in response to my question of what to do to concentrate my mind was now completely fulfilled.

The thrill of becoming a Master class.

In truth, I am not quite sure.

I am not sure when this became possible.

Hadn't I already leaped over the wall, if there ever was one?

I blankly stared at the blue mana coiling around the fork I was holding.

I couldn't really feel what had changed significantly, but I had definitely become able to imbue objects I held with magical power.

Ironically, I used swords the most, but I reached the Master class while digging and using a pickaxe.

Well, if you think of it in terms of martial arts, couldn't you attach words like "Master of Ten Thousand Streams" or something?

"Congratulations, Reinhardt."

"Ah, yes… Thank you…"

I dumbly nodded at Ronan's words.

"Thanks? We didn't teach you anything. You figured it all out by yourself."

Luna said so while quietly eating bread, and Ronan nodded as well.

Perhaps I shouldn't be grateful.

Luna hadn't really taught me anything directly.

She fed me and put me to bed and occasionally spoke vaguely, but strictly speaking, I couldn't say she had taught me directly.

If anything, Arta taught me more.

But that didn't mean I hadn't learned anything from them.

Ronan only talked about the flame of the heart.

Luna only spoke a few words about my emotions.

Such things were more about a mindset than actual teachings.

Had I forgotten my anguish?

Not really.

Had I reached a conclusion about my complex emotions?

No, not that either.

Luna and Ronan thus claimed they hadn't taught me anything.

However, I couldn't say that I hadn't truly learned anything.

The time spent with these two, the days spent in Rezaira.

I couldn't simply think that they had fed me and put me to bed while I was on my personal training.

Luna, as she ate bread, spoke to me while I pondered complex thoughts.

"We'll gather the villagers."

"…"

"Leave tonight."

It's already nighttime; couldn't I stay another day?

That wasn't possible.

To say such a thing would be to admit my fear of returning to the world.

I couldn't postpone facing the changes that had occurred in my absence.

With not a day to spare, I couldn't afford to linger here any longer.

So, Luna tried to send me off quickly before I became weak-hearted, having achieved

my goal. Sending me off quickly was not for her sake, but for mine.

That must be her thought process.

Yet.

That emotionless statement.

It hurt.

A lot.

Quite a lot.

It hurt.

CHAPTER 496

In the center of Rezaira Village stood the town hall.

It was the gathering place for all the villagers when they celebrated feasts, and it was also where everyone had gathered when I first arrived in Rezaira.

The town hall was always bustling with people, whether it was the elderly sharing stories with each other in the winter months when there was little work to be done, or children coming together to play.

One late night.

It wasn't a feast, but the villagers had all gathered because they heard that I, their long-term guest, would be leaving soon.

"We're going to miss you, our dear child."

"Wherever you go, take care. You're a strong one; you'll do well no matter what you do."

"Leaving in the middle of the night? Why don't you wait until the day breaks?"

The elders embraced me and patted my back.

There were some who worried about my nighttime departure, but the majority, knowing it was Luna's decision, nodded their heads and said nothing.

"You've worked hard."

"It seems like you're leaving without ever having a proper rest."

"Let me grab you some potatoes. Just wait a moment."

"I should pack you some jerky. Stay here for a bit."

The men and women hurried back to their homes, returning with bags of preserved

food for my journey, more than I could possibly carry.

"Why are you leaving so soon, big brother?"

"We didn't get to play with you much."

"Can't you just stay here?"

"I wanted to marry you when I grow up!"

"But you promised to marry me!"

"Ugh, you're ugly, Ulf!"

The children bickered amongst themselves, creating a chaotic din.

I wasn't familiar with how to handle children and had never properly played with them.

But as the saying goes, "time makes a thief"; I had been forced to play with them and had been pestered by them all day long.

I said goodbye to each person and finally stood before Arta and Lena.

"Are you leaving?"

"Yes, I am."

Arta wasn't the sentimental type, just like me.

However, he had accurately assessed my situation and guided me on the path I should take.

Arta and I didn't have a tearful farewell.

We simply shook hands.

"May the blessings of the sun and moon be with you."

In a hushed tone, audible only to me, Arta whispered those words.

I had suspected as much, but it was clear that Arta knew about the Sun and Moon Sect, unlike Lena.

"You could have stayed a little longer. I'm sure you have your reasons for leaving so suddenly."

"Well, yes."

Lena blinked away tears as she spoke. In a way, Lena was just like the country girl I had imagined her to be.

She had taken care of me from a distance, neither too close nor too far.

"I never got to ask why you couldn't come with Ellen."

Lena wiped the tears from her eyes and smiled.

"Still, everything will work out."

I knew that believing so didn't necessarily make it true.

"If it doesn't, I'll make it work."

But without that much faith, nothing could be accomplished.

Everything would turn out well.

I would make it so.

Although I had stayed in Rezaira for a long time, my farewells were brief.

Because farewells should not be prolonged.

The villagers had given me so many things that Luna ultimately packed only the essentials into my backpack.

I slung the backpack over my shoulder and fastened the scroll book, which I had unstrapped for a long time, around my waist again.

I changed back into the traveling clothes I had

I put on the traveling clothes I had worn when I first arrived in Rezaira. Though I hadn't worn them in a long time, Luna had kept them clean.

The villagers waved at me from afar as I departed.

The outskirts of Rezaira.

Now, only Luna and Ronan stood by my side.

"My dear."

At Luna's words, Ronan nodded.

Ronan Artorious stood before me.

His imposing figure, with an intense scent of masculinity, was more like a grown man than a youth.

Though he was a man of few words and stern demeanor, he sometimes showed an incredibly tender side to Luna.

Luna wasn't particularly talkative either, but Ronan was especially taciturn.

It wasn't that he disliked me, it was just his nature.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes."

He placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Do you have confidence in making Ellen happy?"

At his candid question, I felt a lump in my throat.

It wasn't an easy thing for him to ask.

However, as difficult a subject as it was for Ronan to inquire about, it wasn't an easy

question for me to answer either.

I had no idea what the future held.

"To be honest, not really."

"…"

Even if I died.

Even if Ellen died.

We would both be unhappy.

How could this twisted relationship be healed? I didn't know where to start, or what to do.

"But I will do what I can. If something seems impossible, I will find a way."

I didn't know how to find a happy outcome for both of us, but I would try. Just like when I found my way into the Master Class and achieved my goal.

If there was no way, I would find one somehow.

I wasn't confident, but I always tried to find a way, and I succeeded.

That was the best I could do right now.

Ronan gazed at me quietly.

"Well, the best advice I can give you, the best answer for you that you can hear from me is this."

"What is… it?"

"After observing you for a while, I give my approval."

It seemed like I had gained his acceptance as a son-in-law.

"Go, Reinhardt."

That was our final farewell.

"Follow me."

“…Yes."

After saying our goodbyes to everyone, Luna Artorious led me over the mountain ridge on the outskirts of Rezaira.

It was still winter, and I was only wearing the clothes I had arrived in.

Thinking about it, my body wasn't really affected by temperature, but I should have packed a sturdier coat.

Luna stood on the edge of the mountain, looking at me.

It was like the night I had met her under the moonlight while wandering the Sren Mountains. Even now, as I was leaving Rezaira, I found myself facing Luna under the moonlight.

"You won't need to set foot in Rezaira again."

“…Yes."

As she said, I would probably never return to Rezaira for the rest of my life.

Considering that it was uncertain whether I would be able to live that long, it was a luxury to worry about ever stepping foot in Rezaira again.

Here, I had not been the Demon King, but a mere guest.

A place where I only had to fear nature.

Life in the mountain village wouldn't be easy, but for me, who had lived a life full of fear and constant vigilance, Rezaira had been a haven.

A place where all I had to do was follow Luna's instructions.

There were times when I wished to live a life like this one.

It didn't have to be in Rezaira specifically, but I often thought that once everything was sorted out, I'd like to live a life where the only concerns were the weather today and tomorrow, and having enough food to last through the long winter.

However, this world was not meant for me.

I have my own world to live in.

That's why I could only be a guest in Rezaira, never a resident.

I must leave.

"Is there anything you'd like to say before you go?"

Things I'd like to say.

There were so many things I wanted to ask and so many things I wanted to say.

What is Sun and Moon clan?

Who are you?

Why do you possess such mysterious powers and yet not interfere with the world?

Several complex thoughts crossed my mind.

But there was one thing I wanted to say.

"I feel resentful."

"…?"

"I said, I feel resentful."

It may seem incredibly petty, but my honest feeling at the moment was that I was truly resentful, and I wanted to cry.

That's right!

I had been here for months, and as soon as my promotion to the master class was confirmed, they were practically kicking me out.

This was really beyond resentment! How could anyone be so heartless?

At my sudden outburst, Luna seemed at a loss and pursed her lips slightly.

"Well, you're resentful. So… what do you want me to do about it? What should I do for you…?"

"It's not about what you should do for me. You asked if I had anything I wanted to say, so I just told you. I feel resentful. That's it."

"I didn't expect you to say that. You have a cute side too, even if it doesn't seem like it."

"I know that too."

"…Huh."

At my response, Luna stared intently at me.

"I thought you'd ask about the secrets of the Sun and Moon clan… but it seems I overestimated you."

"I am only human, after all."

Honestly, I was just as curious about that.

But at this point, what does it matter?

No matter what I ask or say, Luna is a being bound by rules.

My questions might satisfy my curiosity, but they won't change anything in reality.

I had no clue about what Sun and Moon clan was.

"I think Sun and Moon clan might be… related to the vampires of Sun (Sunday) and Moon (Monday) that disappeared long ago."

I figured it out from the flame of Tuesday, and I realized that Eleris was an ancient archdemon.

It was hard not to suspect that Sun and Moon clan was a group connected to them, as the name suggests.

At my words, Luna stared at me silently.

"Do you want to know? About Sun and Moon clan."

The existence of Sun and Moon clan.

Its secrets.

"Of course, I want to know. Naturally."

Even if the satisfaction of curiosity can't change anything in reality.

Even if nothing changes, I was genuinely curious.

"Follow me."

Luna silently led the way.

The night in the mountains was pitch black, even with the winter moon overhead.

But she walked slowly and steadily, as if she could see through the darkness.

I followed her, making sure not to lose sight of her figure.

The place we arrived at was one I knew well.

During the summer, I had meditated beneath the waterfall.

The deep valley where the children used to splash in the water.

Since it was winter, the once-magnificent waterfall was frozen in place, and the valley was solidly iced over.

Luna stood atop the frozen valley, looking at me.

"Let me ask you."

"…"

Luna opened her mouth hesitantly.

"Do you think we're wicked?"

"…"

"Do you think we, who hide in the world, who turn our backs on the world's affairs, and even keep the village children in the dark about what chaos has befallen the world, are wicked?"

Luna did not seem to be arguing.

"I guess there's no reason to say we're wicked."

There isn't necessarily a reason they have to sacrifice themselves for the world. Just because they are strong or wield mysterious powers beyond understanding.

Even if their power can help the world, there is no inevitability that they must risk their lives to do so.

Still, it's true that they felt a certain cruelty.

Although they knew it in their heads, they couldn't deny that in their hearts they wished for a little help.

"At least, I am curious."

"About what?"

"Why you must hide. Why you must turn away."

I stared at Luna, who was quietly looking up at the sky.

"I can't help but think there must be some sort of inevitability to it."

"…"

She turned her gaze and looked at me. There was a law in the Sun and Moon Sect, and because of that, they didn't interfere in the world's affairs, but rather, they couldn't.

That's why when she tried to kill me in the past, she looked like someone who had firmly resolved herself.

She walked silently towards the frozen waterfall.

As she waved her hand, a path appeared as if the space within the waterfall opened up.

I had never seen a cave-like space behind the waterfall when I had been on the left side. It must have been revealed by her power.

Could it be that such a space existed behind this waterfall where the children had carelessly swum and played?

She walked into the suddenly revealed path, and I followed her.

As she flicked her finger, pale white magic lights began to glow in the dark corridor. No, I wasn't even sure if they were truly magic lights.

Luna walked between the pale lights of the magic lamps, spaced evenly along the massive corridor walls.

What was this place?

But I felt like I was getting closer to the secret of Rezaira.

"As you said, the Sun and Moon Sect is related to the ancient Vampire Lords named Sun (Sunday) and Moon (Monday). How much do you know about them?"

At her words, I nodded.

"I only know that they disappeared a very long time ago and that even the Vampire Lords don't know what kind of beings Sunday and Monday were."

Sunday and Monday.

Like Eleris didn't know what they were, neither did I.

"The desire of mortals for immortality is inevitable."

She walked silently down the corridor.

"It has been so since ancient times."

As we walked down the corridor, we soon arrived at a massive niche.

In the middle of it, there was something like a rag, but nothing was hanging on it.

She walked past the niche and continued.

The corridor continued once again, and I could see strange patterns engraved on the walls.

"Before the age of written records, humans existed, of course. Whether through shamanism, runes, rituals, or forbidden arts, the mysteries have been there since before human history began."

"Fearing death."

"Desiring eternal life is a universal wish among mortals."

Before the systematization of magic, before the practice of strengthening the body and mind under the name of Magic Body Strengthening became widespread, there were countless attempts in the distant past to attain immortality through research and experimentation.

"Such mysteries, countless incidents invoking powerful forces without fully understanding what they truly are."

"The end of such mysteries."

Luna and I soon arrived at another chamber after passing through the corridor.

This chamber was much larger than the one we had just left.

There were two sculptures in the chamber.

On the left, a hue that was both yellow and red, their colors intermingling and swirling together.

On the right, it shone with a blue, pure white, and pale yellow light.

It wasn't difficult to figure out what they represented.

The Sun (Sunday) and the Moon (Monday.)

They must have been symbolic representations.

"Granting strength and performing miracles to those who believe and pray, the origin of all beings and the final destination of mysteries."

The apex of mystery.

"Deity."

She approached the sculpture that symbolized the Moon (Monday) and gently placed her hand on it.

"In the distant past, when the gods had no names, people worshipped the moon and prayed."

"They asked for the eternal life of immortality."

"The moon bestowed the blessing of immortality they sought."

"However, they did not pray to the sun."

"They lived in a world where the dominion of the sun and the moon coexisted, praying only to one power."

"The sun may have despised such people."

"The reasons were complex, but the outcome was simple."

"Having desired immortality, they had to pay a fitting price."

"The moon gave blessings."

"The sun cursed a race."

"An immortal race that could not walk under the sun, and was cursed to continue their existence in a barbaric and despicable manner by taking the lifeblood of other beings."

"Do you understand what I'm saying, Reinhardt?"

Luna looked at me.

"Monday, the first vampire."

Vampires were beings that originated from a deity.

CHAPTER 497

There was a time when even the gods had no names. People only knew that various powers existed in the world, and they believed in different things.

Among them, some worshipped the moon, praying fervently for the gift of immortality.

Thus, they received blessings under the moonlight, but became beings that could not live in the sunlight.

The gods grant power according to one's beliefs.

If one believed in a demon, unholy power would be lent to them.

Since they believed in a god while seeking immortality, it meant they were granted immortality.

However, they didn't foresee the curse of the sun.

"Some of them must have willingly accepted immortality, while others did not,"

"There must have been those who despaired, unable to walk under the sun again, and those who were grateful for the chance to live forever under the moonlight."

"All vampires originating from the Moon Clan were creatures of the night."

"Over time, as immortality grew wearisome, some of the Moon Clan began to think."

"Once more, they wished to walk in the sunlight."

"Once more, they wanted to see the world in the brilliant light of the sun."

"Isn't it natural for a being living only in darkness to grow tired of the dark?"

"They tried to overcome the sun."

"The Moon Clan sought to become even more powerful, hoping to defeat the sun with their strength."

"But there were others who thought differently."

"By seeking the sun's forgiveness, they wished to stand under the sun's light once more."

"Vampires who worshipped the sun became the Sun Clan."

"They were the ones who received the sun's forgiveness."

"Rather than seeking the sun's forgiveness, some desired to grow stronger and stand under the sunlight by force."

"After a very long time, both clans managed to face the sun, albeit with great pain."

"They were the vampires who overcame the sun."

"They were the Vampire Lords."

Luna looked at me.

Both had overcome the sun, but in different ways.

Vampires were, in a way, sacred beings born from ancient beliefs.

They were just strange beings who received blessings from some gods and curses from others.

"But this still doesn't change the fact that it's only half a solution, does it?"

Although they could now face the sunlight, most of the Vampire Lords, like what I had seen, experienced immense pain while doing so.

They simply didn't show it.

"As time went on and neared eternity, the true origins of vampires were forgotten, and new lineages of Vampire Lords were created."

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday.

In the end, the Moon Clan diversified into the Sun Clan and then further diversified into different Vampire Lord families.

I couldn't tell how long a time Luna was talking about, but I knew it was an incredibly long time.

"The oldest families among the Vampire Lords, the Moon and Sun Clans, were bound to have an inevitable fate."

"An inevitable… fate?"

"Yes."

Luna looked at me.

"They enjoyed everything as immortals, but that led to a deficiency they wished to resolve."

"The pain in the sunlight."

"And the longing for life."

"They wanted to become human again."

"To stand under the sunlight."

"To conceive new life."

"They wanted to regain what they had already forsaken."

"By dedicating all their remaining lives to serving both the moon and the sun."

"As a living being, if I were to regain my life, I would devote all of my remaining existence to worshipping the gods," they promised the gods.

"They longed to return to their human form."

The immortal life eventually evoked a yearning for what that very immortality had

taken away. She placed one hand on the sculptures of the moon and sun before her.

"The vampires of the Moon Clan and Sun Clan borrowed time in order to return to their human forms."

"They prayed together."

"To both the moon and sun, simultaneously."

"They asked the sun for mercy and the moon for forgiveness."

"They prayed for a time too long to count."

"Even the gods could not ignore the prayers that lasted for such an impossibly long time."

"They had granted immortality, yet like petulant children, they cried out for it to be taken back, those pitiful creatures."

"They wanted to turn away, but ultimately, they couldn't."

Luna looked at me.

"I forgave them."

Her words made my head feel as if it had frozen.

It was a statement that overturned all the assumptions I had made about Luna's words so far.

Not that they had been forgiven.

But that she had forgiven them.

"What… What are you… saying…?"

Luna gazed at me quietly.

"The vampires who returned to their human forms, the descendants of the Moon and Sun Clans, make up the Sun and Moon clan. I am the leader of the Sun and Moon clan,

their caretaker."

The Lord of the Sun and Moon clan.

Not one of them, but the one who guided them.

Luna Artorious.

She looked at me, with one hand on the moon and the other on the sun.

"The will of the gods sent down to the world by the gods of the moon and sun, their messenger."

Not the one who had been forgiven.

But the one who had forgiven.

"I am the embodiment of the moon and sun."

She was an even more transcendent being than I had thought.

The embodiment of the gods.

That meant she was a god herself, and at the same time, she was not.

"The Sun and Moon clan is the oldest religious group in the world. They are an organization that is only allowed to worship the moon and sun, and I have lived through the ages as their protector and overseer."

It was for that reason that Luna was such a special existence within the Sun and Moon clan.

It was impossible to calculate how long Luna had existed.

The Sun and Moon clan was a religious group.

In exchange for returning to their human forms, the Sun and Moon Clan swore to devote their lives to serving the gods.

Not interfering in worldly affairs was a promise the Sun and Moon clan made to the gods.

That was the truth of the Sun and Moon clan, which had been passed down through countless generations.

And Luna was not a member of the clan, but existed as their protector and overseer.

"Wait… Then my father…"

"Ronan is human."

At this point, I couldn't tell whether Luna was amazing or if it was incredible that Ronan had married the embodiment of the gods.

"Both the Sun and Moon clan and I are bound to the roles given by the gods. Now you understand why I cannot interfere in worldly affairs."

It was alright for Luna's children to venture into the world, but not for Luna herself.

Both Luna and the descendants of the Moon and Sun Clans were paying the price for regaining their human forms.

"Um… It's a bit awkward to say this, but you tried to kill me."

"If I had succeeded, I would have vanished. I would have had to pay the price for doing something that was not permitted."

It was an act that risked not only my life but also her own annihilation.

Having lost her son, and now facing the loss of her daughter, Luna had staked her existence on trying to kill me.

But because she had given up on that, Luna could still exist.

"It's just a story. Someone who has watched humans for too long, growing curious about what a true human life is. In the end, wanting to live that life, and becoming human… It's not a grand story."

Becoming human after watching humans for too long.

Upon hearing my remark that Luna resembled Ellen not only in appearance but also in character, she had seemed surprised but also delighted, her face full of emotion.

Luna was a god, yet not a god, a peculiar being.

"That's the end. There's nothing more to explain, and nothing more you need to know."

"How did you meet father?"

"…"

At my question, Luna furrowed her brow and looked at me.

"I have no reason to explain that to you."

Luna snapped, as if telling me not to ask such impertinent questions.

It was time to go back.

I had to return to face what awaited me.

What had happened outside?

Could it be that something irreversible had occurred?

Luna approached me silently.

Now, to send me back.

"Ragan was lively, and Ellen was calm, but both were well-behaved children."

She stood in front of me, speaking about her children.

"How fortunate it was that they weren't disobedient and arrogant like you, throwing tantrums. I often thought that while looking at you."

"But I think I listened well too."

"How fortunate it was that they weren't children who made unnecessary remarks."

Luna smiled and placed her hand on my shoulder.

"But… I've come to think that having a son like you wouldn't have been so bad after all."

"Then have another child to set things straight."

"Hey!"

-Whack!

"Ouch!"

In the end, I couldn't avoid a slap.

How many times had I been hit by the divine fists so far, and how many times had my back been struck?

No one else could have had an experience like mine.

I was leaving Rezaira with nothing but strange experiences.

It wasn't because this was a village controlled by the gods' avatar, but because it was my first time living in such a naturalistic environment.

Luna sighed deeply, watching me get slapped one last time.

"Close your eyes."

Was it really time to go?

I had closed my eyes for a moment, and then I was able to arrive in Rezaira.

Now, when I open my eyes again, I should be able to leave Rezaira.

"Mother."

"What?"

"Thank you."

"…”

That was my heartfelt sentiment.

Now I understood why she hadn't taught me anything.

If I had given my body to the Sun and Moon clan, I would have been bound by their rules.

If I had learned their secret arts, it would have been a terrible disaster for me.

She hadn't taught me anything because she wanted to protect me, and now I understood that.

Luna was silent for a long time in response to my words.

And then,

"Reinhardt."

"Yes?"

She bid me farewell.

"May you…”

She whispered softly.

"Be blessed by the Sun and Moon."

It was a similar phrase to what Arta had told me.

But it was slightly different.

She didn't tell me to open my eyes.

The weight of the hand on my shoulder disappeared, and the air seemed to change.

-Whooooosh!

"Where…?"

A fierce wind whipped through the mountains.

I found myself back on the summit of a mountain where I had met Luna long ago.

The time was night.

“…What's going on?"

I felt a strange sense of dissonance.

The season was winter.

In such a place with strong winds, one should feel an intense cold that would make one's skin feel like it was tearing.

But though the wind was fierce, I didn't feel the biting cold one would expect.

Also, there was no snow piled up white anywhere I looked.

And most importantly,

"What…?"

There were the scattered corpses of brutally killed monsters nearby.

It was a memory from quite some time ago, but I hadn't forgotten it.

While crossing the Sren mountain range and searching for Rezaira, I had fought many monsters.

On one of those days, I had called Luna, exhausted from battling monsters in this place.

As if answering my call, Luna came to find me, and I was able to enter Rezaira.

But the scene was precisely the same as when I was on my way to Rezaira.

The bleeding bodies of the monsters.

From that, there was only one thing I could infer.

Time had.

Barely passed.

'Trust me.'

Only now could I understand the true meaning of those words.

CHAPTER 498

The moment she entered the village and gazed at the sky with her mysterious gesture, I wondered if she was manipulating the flow of time.

Had I been dreaming?

Did I really go to Rezaira?

But it seemed certain that I had not dreamed, but instead, I had entered and returned from the world called Rezaira.

"Ha, hahaha…"

I couldn't help but wonder why she hadn't told me about this.

Perhaps because knowing that time wasn't flowing might cause it to spread.

Knowing that time wasn't flowing would make it too easy to relax.

So she remained silent to stimulate my anxiety and impatience, but also to help me overcome it on my own.

I hadn't left Edina for the length of two seasons.

It hadn't even been a month since I left Edina.

I had lived in another world, another time, before returning to this world.

-Woosh!

In the midst of the harsh wind, I looked down at the scenery of the Sren mountain range.

She hadn't taught me anything.

She hadn't given me anything.

What I needed most right now.

And what I lacked the most.

Time.

I had received an enormous amount of time, so there was no way I hadn't received anything.

"Huu…"

Although I didn't shed tears, I wiped away the moisture that welled up in my dry eyes.

If I had known that time wasn't flowing, I could have actually lived more peacefully. I decided not to dwell on such thoughts.

Luna had given me what I needed the most, and in the end, I was able to obtain what I wanted.

I don't know how far I can go with this power.

However.

Though the actual time spent away wasn't long, I had been away for too long.

Now, I must return to where I belong.

"To be honest, I don't think you did anything wrong. Um… I'd even like to give you a pat on the back for a job well done, if I could."

"…"

In response to Olivia Lanze's words, Liana de Grantz looked at Olivia with a stern expression and said nothing.

Olivia Lanze was not wearing casual clothes, but the priest's robes she usually wore.

In fact, Olivia hardly ever wore casual clothes now, so those robes were virtually her everyday attire.

When Olivia heard that Liana de Grantz had been selecting and killing refugees on her own in Port Mokna, she listened to the details and responded that it was only natural.

"Personally, I don't like it, but I can't say I don't understand the Council's decision. After all, you did deceive Reinhardt. Even if you had no choice but to deceive him because he would never have allowed it if he knew, the result is still the result."

"…"

"Anyway, I personally support your decision. However, our affairs have grown too big to be decided solely by personal judgment, right?"

"…Yes."

"You've deceived Reinhardt up until now, and as a result, you've deceived me as well."

The majority of the forces in Port Mokna are either the magicians of the Vampire Council or the priests and knights of the Holy Order.

They were so loyal to Liana in the Holy Order's Port Mokna that they deceived Olivia Lanze.

Olivia had effectively been betrayed by the priests and knights of the Holy Order.

"For someone like you, who by nature has no talent for politics or anything of the sort, to win over the hearts of everyone in Port Mokna and prevent rumors from leaking out while carrying out such deeds… it's nothing short of a miracle."

Liana had no talent for capturing someone's heart, nor did she enjoy such endeavors.

What allowed Liana, as the commander of Fort Mokna, to captivate everyone's heart was her innate charisma.

"Putting aside any trivial emotions or feelings of betrayal, I can be on your side."

Olivia lightly tapped the table.

"It would have been better if there weren't these 'strange side effects'…"

Olivia didn't come to Fort Mokna to pursue Liana, nor to punish the Holy Order's knights and priests who failed to report their duties.

The outskirts of Fort Mokna, a pit.

She had come to resolve the strange omen discovered by Lucinil.

No one in this environment, with plenty of priests and knights, had realized that such signs were present.

Only Lucinil, with his strong spiritual sensitivity, could detect the strange omen before it materialized into a sinister phenomenon.

That's why Olivia Lanze came here, bearing the duty of purification and exorcism.

Liana, too, had no idea that the massacre she had committed would lead to such events.

Feeling the bitterness of her mistake, Liana couldn't even tell how her actions would bring about any form of disaster.

It wasn't just things within predictable boundaries.

Worldly events could cause unforeseen problems in completely unexpected places.

But Liana's enemies were living beings, beings with physical forms.

Since she didn't know how to deal with ghosts and vengeful spirits, Olivia Lanze had to bear the responsibility for Liana's actions.

"The Regent did say it might be better to abandon Fort Mokna without taking risks…"

Not knowing what kind of sinister influence this threat could have, Charlotte suggested that it might be better to turn a blind eye.

"In my experience, such events can become more dangerous once they're out of

control."

Not knowing what could happen meant that even if they left the area, some unknown disaster could still strike Edina.

That's why Olivia Lanze judged it better to take precautionary measures rather than ignoring this level of danger.

In the end, Olivia came here to face the danger herself, not knowing what threat could arise for Reinhardt.

Her actions to protect Reinhardt from danger created another threat to him.

"I'm sorry, sister."

At Liana's words, Olivia chuckled.

"I didn't know you could say that."

"Can we… resolve this situation?"

"Well…"

Olivia twisted her head and bit her lip.

"Who in the world would know what could happen when the scale of the problem changes?"

Unprecedented events could lead to unprecedented results. Just as Lucinil couldn't predict what would happen, neither could Olivia.

Whether it could be purified or exorcised…

She didn't know.

Liana, who read Olivia's playful but serious attitude, looked at her with a determined expression.

"Don't get hurt, sister."

"It's amusing. You must have disliked me quite a bit."

Olivia laughed loudly.

"Is it because someone we both dislike has appeared?"

That person was none other than Charlotte.

"But you know, it's said that people usually become friends while talking behind each other's backs."

Liana had nothing to say to that wicked jest.

"I'll go. I have work to do."

“…Okay."

Olivia stood up as if she were going for a walk.

Upon leaving the Fort Mokna command post, Olivia watched the group of knights and priests lined up outside.

Although they were all under Olivia's command, Liana had been delegated authority for quite some time.

These were the people who had deceived Olivia by keeping a secret from her and remaining silent.

They were all tense, fearing Olivia's possible wrath.

Betrayal.

She couldn't say it didn't exist.

But she understood why Liana had made such a decision and the reasons for keeping it a secret.

Now, she was on her way to deal with the consequences of those actions.

"Well… shall we begin?"

Olivia smiled as if she had no interest in judging those who had betrayed their faith.

"I'll be the one to clean up the mess you've made."

Olivia Lanze was known for her coarse language, except during her sermons.

In the outskirts of Fort Mokna, quite far from the main area.

Olivia, escorted by a large number of knights and priests, headed for the site.

Though Olivia was not involved in this matter, most of the priests and knights heading to the site were directly related to it.

They had sorted and weeded out people, even taking some to the execution site.

"Did you really think nothing would happen after killing so many innocent people? At least you should have performed purification rituals periodically, right?"

Olivia calmly spoke as they walked through the outskirts of Fort Mokna.

"That's a reprimand."

Even if Liana hadn't anticipated the vengeful spirits, the priests and knights should have taken such measures.

A high priest walking beside Olivia paled and lowered his head at her words.

"Your Holiness… It's not that we didn't do it."

"You did?"

"Yes, certainly…"

Even though they hadn't anticipated this outcome, they had been performing purification rituals and offering prayers and blessings regularly, even for those they had killed themselves.

Olivia's playful expression hardened.

"So, even with the purification rituals, this still happened."

Too many deaths.

The overwhelming grudges, vengeful spirits, and injustices that couldn't be resolved through periodic purification rituals and prayers.

Anger and hatred.

The fact that this was happening despite the blessings of numerous priests indicated that the severity of the situation was beyond normal.

Olivia and the priests she led soon arrived at the site.

"It seems like the situation is getting worse…"

What only Lucinil could sense a few days ago, had become palpable to Olivia, making her feel a chill on the back of her neck.

It wasn't visible, but there was a sense of foreboding that could be felt on their skin.

Cold air.

Olivia slowly approached the pit hidden between the rocks that Lucinil had seen before and looked into its depths.

"…This is terrible."

In the dark pit, countless charred corpses were piled up, too many to count.

Judging by their burnt appearances, they were all the victims of Liana de Grantz's lightning strikes.

"Did that madwoman kill them all with her own hands…?"

Olivia bit her lip as she gazed upon the horrifying scene that could hardly be described as anything but gruesome.

Since it was her decision, she couldn't allow others to dirty their hands, so she killed them all herself.

Even though others had selected and brought them here, it was certain that Liana de Grantz had personally driven them into the pit and snuffed out their lives.

-Woooooo

The eerie resonance of the wind blowing into the deep pit sounded to Olivia like the cries of those who had been unjustly killed.

It must have been a delusion, but the strange echo felt as if it was not a delusion at all. Olivia slowly retreated from that spot.

Staring at this dreadful scene wouldn't solve anything.

"I'll create a sanctuary."

Thankfully, the power of Tu’an, the goddess of purity that Olivia had mastered, was optimal for solving such a problem.

At Olivia's command, the priests and holy knights began to move busily.

What would have happened if they had left this place as it was?

If they had been just a little late?

If the silver-haired little girl who was the Lord of Wednesday had not detected this omen beforehand, what kind of phenomena would these resentful spirits have caused to harm the Demon King?

Hoping that somehow measures would be taken, Olivia summoned Tiamata.

-Woong

Olivia planted the shining Tiamata in the center of the field.

-Thud!

Olivia quietly watched the priests arrange themselves according to the proper

formation and the holy knights take their positions.

-Woooooo

Olivia was quite knowledgeable about spirits and the souls of the dead. Tu'an was a goddess of purity that repelled impurity, and thus understanding impure, unnatural entities was necessary.

Olivia felt a strange sensation as she watched the wind howling across the field, swirling oddly.

She didn't know how many people had suffered unjust deaths here.

However, considering the entire continent, it would ultimately amount to a handful of deaths.

It was true that Liana de Grantz had committed an unforgivable sin, and Olivia had no intention of denying that. She simply thought it was a necessary act for Reinhardt.

Countless people had died.

That was not the only problem.

Just as evil spirits cling to places filled with spiritual energy, this place had become a den of vengeful spirits, boiling with resentment and hatred, attracting more spirits.

Those who died here.

Wandering spirits, ghosts, and paranormal phenomena.

Massacres.

People who hated the Demon King were slaughtered by his minions.

The problem was not only those who died here, but also that this place itself had attracted a tremendous number of vengeful spirits.

And now, with most humans believing that everything was the Demon King's fault, all the spirits would hate the Demon King.

Spirits that hated the Demon King were infiltrating this place.

Like a magnet or a pitfall trap.

If Olivia's speculation was correct, this place would become increasingly dangerous if left alone.

No, it was already far beyond the point of danger.

Therefore, Olivia's decision to take action before the area became more dangerous and expanded was not wrong.

It was undoubtedly the correct decision. Measures were necessary, and the ones who could handle this situation were Olivia, the holy knights, and the priests.

However, it wasn't as if there hadn't been purification rituals until now.

Despite the periodic purifications up to this point, the situation was still this bad.

The Prayers of the priests. The Summoning. The Exorcisms of the holy knights.

Could these really have worked effectively?

Olivia quietly thought as she watched the movement of the priests.

Praying for the repose of the souls I've killed.

Though I've killed you without reason, don't be resentful, and ascend peacefully.

What kind of deed is this?

Do these people have the qualifications for prayer, summoning, and purification?

The holy knights.

The priests.

And herself.

Do they have the qualifications?

If I were a vengeful spirit.

Seeing the murderers who brutally killed me trying to make me ascend.

What kind of feelings would I have?

Is this the hypocrisy of demons destined to fall into hell?

I don't know what other methods there are, but.

Something is definitely wrong.

"Wait!"

Just as Olivia, who felt that something was seriously wrong, cried out.

-Woooaahhhh!

From the pit, an abyss surged forth.

With wide eyes, Olivia saw the physical manifestation of hatred and resentment.

-Wraaaagh!

A ghastly scream of pain, hatred, anger, or injustice - it was impossible to tell.

No, it was a mixture of all those things, a physical manifestation of resentment, wailing in agony. Olivia clenched her teeth as she watched.

"Fine."

Olivia pulled out the Tiamata embedded in the ground.

"Of course, it wouldn't be easy."

Olivia's entire body was enveloped in a divine light.

CHAPTER 499

Olivia Lanze and the priests could only gape at the appearance of the massive horde of spirits for a moment before they had to immediately engage in battle.

The fight against these enormous, unidentified ghostly entities took on a form that made them wonder if it could even be called a battle.

The overwhelming shapes of immense hatred, which seemed to crush them just by looking at them, suddenly split into dozens of soul clusters in midair, and descended upon the Holy Knights and priests.

Aaarrghh!

Ah… T-Tu'anis…

The spirits swarmed the Holy Knights and priests in an instant, causing them to foam at the mouth and lose consciousness, or to tear at their hair in agony.

Ptooey! Pffft!

Unable to withstand the burden on their minds and bodies, the priests and Holy Knights began to swell grotesquely, and one by one, they started to burst.

Those who didn't burst began to exhibit strange behaviors.

Urrghh!

Shk!

As if overwhelmed by something, they indiscriminately swung their swords at the surrounding priests and Holy Knights.

"Possession…"

It was rare for evil spirits and miscellaneous ghosts to possess humans and commit bizarre acts, but it happened.

However, it had reached the point where these highly trained Holy Knights and priests were being possessed.

That's how powerful and overwhelming these spirits were.

Some even failed to withstand the possession and their bodies collapsed.

These were spirits more powerful than any ever encountered before.

The fragments of the spirits that burst forth from the bodies of the priests began to frantically search for their next host.

She didn't know how to deal with those who were possessed, but she had to handle them before possession occurred.

Olivia charged towards the rampaging spirits.

"Judgment upon those who have strayed from the path of purity."

Her sacred sword Tiamata responded to Olivia's words and began to emit a gentle golden light.

There was no time to consider the morality of her actions.

At this rate, the priests would be massacred.

She had to do everything she could.

"Peace to those who cannot find rest."

Oooohhh!

Olivia charged at the spirit trying to enter its next host and violently thrust Tiamata into it.

"Power to eradicate all beings that have strayed from the path."

Flash!

Screeeeech!

"In my hands!"

Olivia Lanze was the only priest in the world who did not appeal to a god.

Rumble!

Along with the release of a storm-like golden divine power, the spirits entwined in it were torn to thousands of pieces and vanished in an instant. Olivia and the other priests could clearly see this.

Olivia shouted towards the priests.

"It's not invincible! Stand firm and face them! They are just spirits that couldn't die and have gathered from all over the world!"

At Olivia's rough cry, all the priests gritted their teeth.

They were the ones who possessed immense power against these unclean beings.

Even if they had spent a long time fighting monsters, confronting and expelling such unclean beings was even closer to the original mission of the priests.

They couldn't succumb to fear.

No matter how powerful the spirits, no matter how intense their hatred.

They could definitely be eradicated.

The Demon King had returned.

He had left, saying he might be away for quite some time, but he returned in less than a month.

However, the close associates who saw the returned Demon King, Reinhardt, couldn't help but feel something strange about him.

"Reinhardt…?"

"It's been a while. How have you been?"

"Ah, it's you… You said it would take a long time… But you came back early, didn't you? Why, why are you touching my hair…?"

As Reinhardt touched Harriet's hair, saying he had missed her, his face expressed an indelible joy.

His demeanor, gaze, and actions all exuded a feeling that he had spent a very long time in a faraway place.

Not just his gaze, but his whole aura felt different from before.

It wasn't anxiety or impatience but rather a sense of composure and tranquility that seemed to fill his heart.

"Where is Charlotte?"

"She should be in her office."

"Nothing happened, did it?"

"Ah… Well, about that…"

"Why? Did something happen?"

"Well… It's probably better to hear it from Charlotte."

Even though the seasons hadn't changed, time had indeed passed.

So, in the absence of the Demon King, various things had inevitably occurred.

I knew that there was no such thing as absolute justice in the world.

I was well aware that choosing something meant losing something else.

Sitting in a position where you make too many decisions would inevitably lead to sacrificing someone, even if you thought you were making the best choice for

everyone. I knew that too.

However, when the truth that I knew only in my head came crashing into reality before my eyes, I couldn't help but feel that this position was too much for me.

"Liana did…?"

"Yes."

Liana had been sorting out the refugees.

By now, an incalculable number of survivors had died at Liana's hands.

I listened to Charlotte's calm report and nodded numbly.

I had been worried that some significant change would happen in my absence.

But the change had already happened.

It had been happening all along while I was in my position, and I had no idea.

"So, the search for survivors is on hold until you come back and make a new decision. The relocation of the base is also on hold."

In the end, I am the one ultimately responsible.

Charlotte had paused all decisions and halted progress until my return.

Apart from this incident, I couldn't help but admire Charlotte's ability.

The fact that she had noticed something I hadn't been able to grasp at all while reading the report.

In the end, Charlotte was the one who truly belonged in this position, not me.

"By the way, where have you been? I thought it would be a long time before you came back…"

Charlotte tilted her head.

"And you seem… quite different."

"Really?"

"Yes, I don't know how to explain it, but…"

Like Harriet, who had looked at me with a slightly puzzled expression, Charlotte also seemed to get a somewhat unfamiliar feeling from me.

I wasn't quite sure how to respond to Charlotte's comment.

I had spent a considerable amount of time in a world where time flowed differently from reality.

Would they believe me if I said that no time had passed when I returned?

"What were you doing and where?"

"Um…"

I couldn't tell her directly about the Sun and Moon clan. Luna hadn't told me to keep it a secret, but there wouldn't be any good in spreading it around carelessly.

But if they asked me what I did in Rezaira, I didn't have a particular reason to hide it.

It wasn't as if anything significant had happened, right?

When I tried to say it, what I had been doing for the past few months seemed quite bizarre.

"I cut wood and plowed fields."

"…Huh?"

Charlotte seemed to think I was making some kind of joke and tried to force a laugh, but ultimately couldn't.

I had to think about Liana's problem.

It wasn't just a matter of whether or not to punish Liana; the issue Charlotte brought to me was more than that.

Liana had driven people to their deaths in a deep pit somewhere on the outskirts of Fort Mokna.

"Vengeful spirits?"

"Yeah, the Lord of Wednesday said there might be trouble later on because of the enormous amount of malevolent energy coming from there."

Charlotte had already reported the matter to the Council of Elders.

I had seen ghosts myself in the Vampire Council. However, I had heard that they couldn't greatly influence the real world.

But Lucinil believed that too many vengeful spirits could indeed affect the real world.

"Anyway, this morning, the head of the Holy Order, Olivia Lanze, went on a mission. She should be the right person for the job."

"I see."

"I wonder if there's even a need for us to intervene. Abandoning Port Mokna would solve the problem… But it seems they want to eradicate the source."

With Olivia's divine power and her shared connection to Tiamata and me, she should be able to exorcise or purify the massive number of vengeful spirits.

While I don't know what problems these concentrated spirits might cause, Olivia has already been dispatched to handle the situation.

"And, the Empire has begun organizing a large-scale expeditionary force to suppress the remaining gates."

Suppressing the gates had become impossible with a small special forces unit.

Now, the Empire was organizing a large-scale army to destroy the last gates.

The combined efforts of humanity were coming together, and a total war would be

waged to destroy the remaining warp gates one by one.

This would be humanity's most powerful and final army, formed by staking their lives on it.

If that army disappeared, humanity would face its end.

"We'll need our own countermeasures."

We may not be able to help openly, but we must consider ways to support them from the shadows.

After all, the gate situation is a problem for everyone.

"Anyway, thanks for all your hard work while I was away."

"Uh, huh? No, it's… it's my duty…"

Charlotte's face turned slightly red at my compliment.

Although I had come to know things I would rather not know, it was information I needed.

Charlotte could see and understand things I couldn't. That's why I believe it was a good decision to bring her to Edina.

Upon returning from Rezaira, I discovered that not only was the world's situation far from normal, but Edina's situation was also quite abnormal.

The most urgent matter was the judgment regarding Liana.

I could have made a decision through the Council of Elders, but I decided to confront Liana directly.

Although she had deceived me until now, Liana had carried out those actions, believing they were for my sake.

Regardless of the circumstances, we needed to have a conversation.

I wondered if any of the other Vampire Lords, such as Eleris or Lucinil, were present, but they were both absent, and the only one left in the palace was Antirianus, who had gone out to gather information and returned.

"Welcome back, Your Eminence."

As always, Antirianus appeared sinister on the inside but maintained the utmost courtesy on the surface, which I hadn't seen in quite some time.

I never thought I'd be glad to see this old man.

"Things wrapped up faster than I expected."

"That is truly fortunate."

Although it wasn't actually resolved quickly, it was a problem that would only become more complicated the more it was explained, so there was no choice but to gloss over it.

Just until this morning, I was still in Rezaira.

I felt a peculiar sensation, as if all the moments I had spent in Rezaira had suddenly become a distant past.

There will be no day when I can return to Rezaira, and I must not hope for it.

Even if everything were to be resolved just as I wished, by then, there would still be a great many people for whom I would have to take responsibility.

So let's think of it as having had a very long and lengthy dream.

In a situation where I couldn't even imagine such a life, it could be considered fortunate to have been suddenly thrown into it.

"Anyway, you came to find me; do you have a place you need to go?"

"I think I should go to Port Mokna."

"Ah… that place? I heard some troubling events have been happening there recently."

Antirianus smiled as if he knew why I wanted to go there.

For now, Olivia went there to deal with it, but since I don't know the exact situation, I couldn't gauge the actual level of threat.

"Then, let's prepare right away."

Antirianus began casting Mass Teleport.

CHAPTER 500

The battlefield was a scene of utter despair as they fought against the amalgamation of vengeful spirits.

"Defiant beings who have betrayed the order! Perish in the name of Tu'an!"

The priests were capable of wielding the divine powers of both Demon God and Gods. However, now they needed the power of the Gods.

Olivia leaped towards the possessed-by-a-spirit holy knight, who had begun indiscriminately attacking the priests and fellow knights.

These people hesitated to strike, fearing to attack their comrades.

"Crack!"

Olivia grabbed the rampaging possessed knight by the throat and shouted.

"Begone, wicked beings!"

"Flash!"

"There is no place for you in this world!"

"Rumble!"

A golden storm erupted from Olivia's hand, engulfing the possessed knight.

"Squeeeaaal!"

"Screeeeeeeeech!"

Like being consumed by golden flames, the malevolent spirits that had taken over the knight's body were incinerated, along with the black smoke that erupted violently.

Within the golden flames that burned the souls, Olivia could see the light returning to the lifeless eyes of the knight.

"Gasp… cough…”

But it was only for a moment, as the knight who had regained consciousness foamed at the mouth and collapsed on the spot.

It was just a brief suppression of the spirit, but it was clear that his mind had already been shattered.

This was the power of just one fragment of the enormous vengeful spirit that had been split into dozens of pieces.

The priests, who could be called veterans, were driven to the brink of death by being possessed, those who had the mental strength to resist were dominated, and those who managed to break free from possession already had their minds shattered.

Under the protection of divine power, Olivia watched in a daze as the spirits penetrated their defenses and infiltrated the priests.

Was this the consequence of their sins?

The sins committed by those who wielded the power of the gods were not judged by the gods themselves.

So, the anger, hatred, despair, and fear that had accumulated and coagulated in the pit, along with the injustice and sorrow, were now punishing them.

Were they being judged by the hatred of the people, as the gods did not judge them?

However, Olivia was not alone in this place.

For a moment, the dozens of fragmented vengeful spirits swallowed the priests. Seeing Olivia's form, the priests diligently resisted and fought back.

They gathered together and amplified their divine power, creating a powerful barrier that prevented the spirits from entering, gradually pushing them back.

They could fight back.

However, Olivia felt a change in the atmosphere.

A chilling sensation enveloped her entire body.

The possessed ones stared at Olivia.

As if they had determined who the most threatening enemy was in this situation.

"Growl!"

One of the fragmented spirits, the mass of vengeful spirits, charged towards Olivia.

Olivia smiled in response.

"Come on, then."

Her weapon, Tiamata, was imbued with immense divine power.

"I'll burn you to ashes."

Hatred, despair, and injustice would all vanish, engulfed by the sacred flames that burned the spirits.

"Rumble!"

The mass of vengeful spirits charging at Olivia was shattered and disappeared, engulfed by the divine power storm released by Tiamata.

"Your Holiness! Behind you!"

"…!"

However, whether the frontal charge was meant to divert Olivia's attention or not, three more amalgamations of vengeful spirits were already charging at her, as a shout warned her to turn around.

The possessed knights and priests had been suddenly engulfed by the spirits, leaving them with little time to react.

Nevertheless, Olivia was the first to regain her composure, brandishing her sword

towards the incoming spirits.

-Screech!

With a sensation eerily akin to cutting an intangible form, the cluster of spirits was torn apart.

But then came the second wave.

-Shriek!

"…!"

The spirits assailed the barrier of divine power surrounding Olivia.

However, they could not pierce through the divine energy boiling within her.

And then, there was a third wave.

-Groan!

"Damn it!"

Engulfed by the second wave of spirits, Olivia felt a suffocating pressure.

It was as if she had been submerged in a living mound of mud. Her arms, legs, and even her ability to channel divine power into Tiamata had become inexplicably heavy.

Despite being surrounded by divine fire that burned the impure beings, the cluster of spirits clung to Olivia, tightening their grip.

-Growl!

As Olivia's movements came to a halt, more dark masses erupted from the bodies of the possessed knights and priests.

It seemed their sole purpose was to either kill Olivia or possess her.

Dozens of spirits broke free from their hosts and charged towards Olivia, who

struggled to escape the clutches of the persistent spirits.

-Shriek!

-Thud! Thud! Thump!

Like giant lumps of mud clinging to her, one by one, the spirits began to cover Olivia's body.

“Ugh… Ugh…”

Golden divine power poured from Olivia's body, somehow staving off the erosion, but the enormous horde of spirits relentlessly sought to swallow her whole.

“Save Her Holiness!”

Not only that, the priestesses also began to channel their divine power in an effort to save Olivia from the concentrated assault.

Would they fall, or would they persevere?

There were two paths before them.

But Olivia, struggling with all her might, felt a chilling terror within the suffocating mass of the spirits.

It wasn't that she couldn't defeat them.

Olivia could clearly see the spirits burning away within her divine power and the holy fire of Tiamata.

The spirits were undoubtedly being incinerated.

However, this was not just a single ghost.

It was an innumerable collection of spirits.

Though they appeared to be fused and gathered together, they were, in the end, separate entities.

Countless spirits charged towards Olivia, seeking to swallow her whole as they themselves perished.

-Giggle!

-Mommy…!

-I don't want to die…!

-Why me…?

-Why do I have to die?!

Their dying words, or perhaps their final thoughts, were filled with despair as they penetrated Olivia's divine barrier and assaulted her ears in the form of whispers.

Despair.

-The Demon King.

-Must die.

-Those who side with the Demon King.

-The Demon King himself.

-They all must die…!

-Why did you kill me?

Hatred.

Witnessing the vengeful spirits, who had remained in the world even after death, sacrificing their very existence to seek revenge against the Demon King, Olivia watched in terror.

The spirits were not powerful.

They were numerous.

Far too numerous.

As they perished under the onslaught of Olivia's divine power and that of the priestesses, the spirits sought only to swallow her whole.

As if to self-destruct.

As if staking one's existence on vengeance.

Too many resentful spirits, each a different entity.

But the wind was one.

The death of the Demon King.

The fall of the Demon King.

The destruction of those who followed the Demon King.

Witnessing humanity's hatred for the Demon King and the resentment of the dead, Olivia gritted her teeth.

"What… do you… know…"

You people.

What on earth do you know?

Do you know even the slightest bit of the truth?

"You… know… nothing… nothing at all…"

It's unfair.

This is unfair.

You people know nothing.

In the end, Olivia couldn't help but react to the resentment and fury of the spirits.

And that, in the end, was a crack in her heart.

In the end, it was a moment of faltering.

-Crash!

A crack appeared in the divine power that enveloped Olivia.

Like water seeping into the crevices of a rock.

As if water gushing toward a hole in a dam would eventually collapse it.

-Rumble!

Olivia's body was swallowed by a swarm of black spirits.

"Ah… Ah…!"

The invading dark souls pierced Olivia's mind in an instant.

Is this what it feels like to have one's soul plundered?

Olivia lost her composure for a moment, and the last line of defense, the barrier of divine power, disappeared, and the golden light of Tiamata also went out.

-Groan

Olivia was engulfed in the flood of souls, unable to do anything but scream in a voice that could not be described.

A single shard caused burdens on the bodies of the knights and priests, even causing some to explode.

All the souls rushed to swallow Olivia.

Divine magic poured in from the outside, but already inside, souls were running wild to dominate Olivia's spirit and soul, projecting cursed words not into her ears but into her mind and soul.

The body is inherently a vessel for one mind and one soul.

Countless souls began to mix and enter that vessel.

Even if it were a benevolent soul, the mind of the person experiencing such an event would inevitably shatter.

But it wasn't a benevolent soul; it was a resentful one.

Filled with malice, resentment, and hatred, countless souls with only the will to destroy something invaded the mind, and the mind could not help but be torn to shreds beyond collapse.

Swallowed by hatred and resentment, one could only become a vengeful ghost, running wild for the common desire of the spirits.

However.

"Ugh…!"

Olivia Lanze would not easily collapse.

Born with a divine mind, she had incredible resistance to all interference and harmful effects on her mind from a young age.

The divine don't choose humans who easily break.

She was not made to easily break.

Now, in the stormy sea of souls, Olivia clung to the last piece of her sanity, like a castaway on a raft enduring a sinking ship.

She faced the waves of resentment, like a tidal wave trying to crush her will.

Her physical battle had already been lost, but if her spiritual and soulful struggle also crumbled, she would disappear.

In the terror that she would be plunged into the deep sea of spirits if she let go of her sanity even for a moment.

She strained with all her might not to be drawn into the sensation of plunging, as if the spirits were grabbing her by the hair, her arms and legs, pulling her down, down.

In the bizarre and eerie pain, as if someone were sticking tens of thousands of needles into her brain, and in the fear.

Olivia's fragile spirit was like a small boat on the verge of sinking amidst stormy waves.

Resentment. And the grudges that stemmed from hatred were trying to engulf Olivia.

Due to her resistance against these grudges, Olivia lost her composure and allowed her mind to weaken.

And so, now, Olivia struggled to hold on to her sanity amidst the fear that her sense of self might vanish entirely.

“Huuu… huuuuuuuuu…!”

To face these dark beings and vengeful spirits starved for revenge, Olivia desperately tried to recall the name of a god.

Tu’an.

The goddess of purity.

As if by repeating that name, the sinking of her ego and the destruction of her soul would be averted.

In order to maintain a pure and strong mind, she tried to engrave the name of the god into her heart and soul.

For she needed tranquility to overcome the chaos.

To navigate through the turbulent sea, Olivia Lanze remembered the name of the god.

-Kiaaaaaaaaah!

However, even as she desperately sought the name of the god, divine help did not reach her mental world.

In the stormy sea, the names of the gods were too far away.

In the depths of despair, Olivia managed to grasp her sinking spirit and made a plea.

Oh, the Five Great Gods.

The five deities with different names but of the same essence.

You cannot abandon me like this.

Did you choose me just to let me crumble like this?

I may not know what your intentions are, but surely you didn't create me just to be trampled by mere grudges and obsessions, did you?

Even as she desperately cried out the name of the god in her heart, tranquility did not come, and the vengeful spirits continued to flood Olivia's mind.

To break the vessel named Olivia Lanze, and to dominate her broken body.

In the chaotic state where too many things other than herself had seeped in, at the edge of her consciousness and body, Olivia thought.

If I crumble like this.

If I vanish like this.

Reinhardt.

He would grieve.

If this life, saved by Reinhardt time and time again, were to finally sink into this undeserved hatred.

Reinhardt, who already suffers from the guilt of trying to save the world only for it to fall apart, would blame himself for Olivia's death as well.

She didn't want that to happen.

She couldn't cause him that kind of sorrow.

For Reinhardt, who was already undoubtedly filled with sadness and pain, she could

not be the source of any more despair and fear.

Amidst the torrent of souls pouring in.

In the end, amidst the words of hatred towards the Demon King that they spewed forth.

Olivia finally let go of her obsession with tranquility.

In the end.

This injustice was infuriating.

Why was it Reinhardt's fault that the world ended up like this in the process of trying to protect it?

Why was it Reinhardt's fault that Liana de Grantz killed people at her whim?

Why must Reinhardt bear the responsibility for all of these things?

While their deaths might be pitiable and wretched.

That pity and wretchedness do not justify misguided hatred and anger, do they?

Why, after all.

What did he do so wrong.

That Reinhardt must be subjected to such hatred?

In the end.

Abandoning the mindset of trying to maintain reason and composure while floating above the waves that sought to engulf her.

A single will.

“Thi… these damn demonic bastards…”

Within the torrent, she discovered a rock to cling to.

“It's really… infuriating, isn't it

"Ugh… really…?"

The rock, it seemed, bore the name of fury.

-Zap!

And in response to the fury, the sacred relic released a crimson torrent akin to Olivia's emotions.

-Whirrrrr!

The priests and knights, who had tried to save Olivia in any way they could, witnessed the violent discharge of divine power skyward.

-Rumble

The crimson pillar of divine power shooting toward the sky soon subsided.

The priests, overwhelmed by the sight, were left speechless.

Olivia sat down on the open field, staring blankly at the Tiamata stained with the red aura.

No matter how much she called upon the gods' names, no power appeared.

However, her anger at the unjust situation obliterated the countless vengeful spirits attempting to consume her mind.

Olivia, who had held onto her sanity until the very end, had experienced the horrifying contamination of her mind and soul, but her heart had not broken.

"Ugh…”

But having already endured the excruciating experience, Olivia was now in a state close to exhaustion.

One of the priests hurried over and supported the faltering Olivia.

Olivia gazed at the now-quiet field.

The swarm of vengeful spirits had attacked her en masse, but they had disappeared due to the power of Tiamata, reacting to Olivia's raging fury.

Olivia didn't know how many spirits there had been or how they had vanished.

It was a feat, a miracle.

Having withstood the total onslaught of forces that even skilled priests and knights could not endure, Olivia not only maintained her sanity but also annihilated them all at once.

There was no being in the world more powerful in wielding divine power than Olivia.

Indeed, it was something only Olivia Lanze could accomplish.

The priest supporting Olivia murmured, still dazed.

"Is it… over?"

Everyone hoped that this terrible ordeal had come to an end.

However, Olivia's expression was grim.

As if she had a premonition.

Though she had performed what deserved to be called a miracle rather than divine magic.

Olivia stared at something, her eyes out of focus.

At the bottomless abyss.

She gazed at the pit.

Olivia felt something that no one else could sense.

From the depths of the abyss, something surged.

-Rumble!

The pit erupted, and once more the abyss gushed forth.

-Howling!

The manifestation of hatred that had emerged just moments ago, the swarm of vengeful spirits, had been immense.

However, what now appeared was dozens of times larger than before.

It was as if the swarm of vengeful spirits Olivia had just faced had been divided into dozens of pieces.

The first spirit to appear had also been merely a part of the whole.

Olivia looked up at the manifestation of hatred with a despairing expression.

She had performed a miracle.

But the hatred that pervaded the world was far greater. She stared blankly at the priests, who couldn't even scream in the face of the overwhelming form of terror.

"Run…"

Olivia couldn't finish her sentence.

How could they possibly escape?

How could they escape from such a thing?

-Howl!

The howling wave of vengeful spirits once again engulfed Olivia.

This time, Olivia couldn't resist.

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